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“Inhumanly Beautiful”: The Aesthetics of the Nineteenth-Century Deathbed Scene

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“Inhumanly Beautiful”: The Aesthetics of the Nineteenth-Century Deathbed Scene

by

Margo Masur

An Abstract of a Thesis
in
English

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

December 2015

State University of New York
College at Buffalo
Department of English

Abstract

Death today is hidden from our everyday lives so it cannot intermingle with the general public. So when a family member dies, their body becomes an object in need of disposal; no longer can they be recognized as the familiar person they once were. To witness death is to force individuals to confront the truths of human existence, and for most of us seeing such a sight would fill us with an emotion of disgust. Yet during the nineteenth century, the burden of care towards the sick or dying was shared by a community of family, neighbors, and friends; the death of each person was a public occurrence. Death happened at home and, instead of being met with repulsion, was greeted as an event.

In this study, I explore the Victorian family's shared emotional and psychological support of the deathbed scene, particularly in the literary treatment of the dying and dead body, while also comparing it to our modern attitudes of death. Both the sickroom and the deathbed were important spaces in Victorian life and literature as abjection of the body is forced away in favor of a literary escapism in which the young, dead woman in the text not only stays beautiful, but is also "frozen" in time to preserve her purity and innocence against mortal aging and sin. This study will prove how both time periods distort the realities of death, but with reasonably different methods.

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Dedication

To my mother. I love you. I will always love you.

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Introduction

Nineteenth-Century Deathbed Scenes

Death today is hidden from our everyday lives as we partition off spaces for the sick and dying so they cannot intermingle with the general public: the elderly sent to nursing homes, the terminally ill to hospice care, and the ailing transferred to hospitals where doctors and nurses are the ones confronted with bodily horrors, such as wounds, feces, and vomit. After death comes the reality of what to do with the corpse. When a family member dies, their body becomes an object in need of disposal; no longer can they be recognized as the familiar person they once were. To witness death is to force individuals to confront the truths of human existence, and for most of us seeing such a sight would fill us with an emotion of disgust. Corpses decay, and the stages of decomposition occur right after death as the body begins to cool and bacteria breaks down the flesh. This is the reason why the dead frighten us because they represent “the most obvious symbol of the individual’s fear of ‘nonbeing,’ in that each of us has a finite existence” (Hayslip 34). Nevertheless, a bereaved survivor may still feel attached to their deceased kin and imagine this rotting figure as having a social identity. Mourners often incorporate social and cultural rituals to allow themselves to cope with personal experiences of death, though modern notions in Western society challenge the belief of a soul as a diminishing notion (Gore 2). In terms of corporeal reality, funeral homes may offer embalment to delay the process of decomposition while also retaining the corpse’s “natural” appearance until the funeral directors, too, must eventually turn the dead over for burial or cremation as it is still organic material. Biological decay is inevitable, but should be considered natural, even if we prefer to avoid it for the sake of anxieties regarding bodily dissolution and nonexistence. It is for this reason people

should not attach any identity to human remains, despite our struggles to soften the image of death for grieving survivors.

Personal contact with death can now be avoided, and the corpse is kept away from the public eye to maintain sanitary borders so that it does not contaminate the quality of a happy and productive life. The only “experience” of death most of us see are the simulated images portrayed in mass media that shape our opinions of what the whole aspect of dying and death is supposed to look like. We participate in these voyeuristic — *albeit* falsified — images because death is now commercialized and a major theme in the entertainment industry. Representations of death do not affect us as they are at the expense of others, and these fictionalized scenes can be controlled and watched safely inside our own households (Quigley 41). It should be noted, however, the theme of death portrayed in visual artwork is not new; in fact,

Death and dying are universal human experiences, no matter the historical era or cultural context, and those oriented toward visual representation have always attempted to articulate the experience of death in whatever medium was available.
(Walton 989)

But how people have perceived the various manifestations of death, dying, and the dead has varied over time and across different cultures. For those in today’s Western culture, we see “individuals . . . generally lack[ing] firsthand experience with death, [and] the phenomenon of death and dying has become abstract and invisible” (Durkin 43). A media aestheticization of death in popular culture allows the viewer a visual closeness to the dead, but keeps the reality of dying distant from them, physically, to protect the instinctive drive for self-preservation. As a result, many of us have become desensitized to television’s version of violence and gore, and

have become morbid curious; a phenomena described by Professor Jack B. Haskins as an “unusually strong attraction to information about highly unpleasant events and objects that are irrelevant to the individual’s life” (qtd. in Edwards 99). Obviously, we should not disregard any educational interests in death, violence, or other events that can cause harm physically or emotionally, for “Curiosity may be defined as a desire to know, to see, or to experience that motivates exploratory behavior directed towards the acquisition of new information” (Liman 793). Yet is the cultural portrayals of the dying or dead in the media “irrelevant” because they are unrealistic? Whether sentimental or sensational, death seen on television or in movies is hardly accurate (Quigley 40). Its appearance in mass culture often blends with fact and fantasy, depending on the genre of storytelling and its usage of the corpse in the narrative.

However, associating with *actual* death is thought to be taboo as corpses are seen as the primary example of cognitive dissonance amongst the living. Many cultures view the disintegration of human remains as unclean, and the dying and dead are thought to be transgressive, grotesque, and threatening because the rotting body is a particularly unstable object. Mourners may regard their dead as people, but the horrifying aspects of rot still give reason to fear the realities of pollution and contamination coming from the corpse. Funeral director Dr. Stephen Gore calls this liminal period of the corpse before burial “betwixt and between — not alive but endowed with vestigial personality by the bereaved; decaying but prevented from manifesting this change because [the corpse] is not completely socially dead” (91). The sensory appearance of a dead body we recognize as a family member disturbs us because this once familiar figure is currently undergoing a transformation most of us find too degrading and appalling to witness. We become dismayed by this “*interpenetration* of life and

death, the incongruous joining of the two . . . as if two great opposites have mysteriously joined forces” (McGinn 90). The corpse, then, is ambiguous, because it represents an image between life and death, where both conditions occur at the same time. And as soon as decay begins, the corpse looks less like the lifeless beloved, and becomes a site of repulsion. As American poet William Carlos Williams wrote, the dead are “a godforsaken curio / without / any breath in it” (qtd. in Gilbert 104). Life’s end is a material reality, and it is important to “just bury [the dead] / and hide its face / for shame” (Williams, qtd. in Gilbert 104). Death is simply termination and the corpse becomes a thing; no longer should the dead be regarded with any social identity.

For Julia Kristeva, feelings of fear and unease is described in her concept of abjection. In her essay *Powers of Horror*, disgust for the dead is important because the corpse is the greatest example of the abject, for it is neither human nor nonhuman and reminds us of our own materiality, especially if we recognize someone we know who has died. Abjection, a term she defines as the human reaction to a threatened breakdown in meaning, is something that is neither subject nor object; rather, it is something that “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). When confronted with a corpse, we are supposed to be horrified by this image, considering our repulsion of anything abject is a source of protection to preserve the boundary between the ego and the non-ego, as well as allowing us to separate ourselves from what goes against the norms of society. After all, the unity of body and mind collapses after death due to the physical corruption of the body via the decomposition process, and thus, we lose identity and our social status in society. “To abject” literally means “to cast out,” and because we are all subjected to a transformational process of decay after death, we all will, inevitably, become faceless and

bodiless as time goes on. Therefore, as Vivienne Muller states in her article, “Abject d’Art,” “Western civilization experiences extreme unease with the dead body which has resulted in all kinds of aesthetic interventions to negate its ‘reality’ as decaying matter” (par. 2). The natural corpse makes death unquestionably present, and any concern with the departed’s fate is compromised upon viewing rituals during memorial services.

Over the centuries, people have attempted to decelerate or even stop the decomposition process from occurring in the corpse. Modern-day embalming helps preserve, sanitize, and cosmeticize our dead via a chemical process to ensure a better viewing at funerals for family and loved ones. Yet by doing this, we also deny natural death and model the corpse into an appropriate and culturally acceptable image. In the words of Howard C. Raether and Robert C. Slater, “The funeral is an experience in which a person can face the reality of what has happened, let memory become a part of the process of grieving . . . and attempt to place the death in a context of meaning acceptable to the individual experiencing the trauma of separation” (qtd. in Quigley 70). Through preserving the corpse via the embalmment process, physical remains can be controlled and disguise real death by transforming the ordinary corpse into a culturally acceptable image while religious faith in the eternal soul continues to weaken. The purposes of embalming are numerous: to disinfect, to protect public health, “to facilitate the creation of a ‘Beautiful Memory Picture’” (Ashwood 406). The funeral industry encourages embalming and viewing the corpse as a way to show respect for the body, and also to sustain the identity of the deceased kin so that the reality of death does not taint their familiar image of the dead loved one. In this way, the embalmer is the architect of corporeal preservation who recreates and repairs the lifeless for appropriate viewing. We seek out this person who supervises or conducts the

preparation of the dead for burial because it is a continuation of our modern-day need to control and manage our fears from bodily dissolution. And with the sudden advances in medicine, it is no wonder Western society participates in a death-denying culture for both dying *and* death are considered failure.

Yet the early Victorians treated death differently. In the nineteenth century, the burden of care towards the sick or dying was shared by a community of family, neighbors, and friends; the death of each person was a public occurrence. Death happened at home and, instead of being met with repulsion, was greeted as an event: “The deathbed scene was a spectacle to be seen and studied by those closest to the dying person” (“Euthanasia” 8). And while “the emergence of the modern family, of a new spiritualisation of human experience, of the new emphasis on personal affections, sentiments and the imagination brought about a new welcoming of death,” nineteenth-century literature expressed a hatred of ugly death, and “used to hide the physical signs of mortality and decay and to overcome any sense of separation or loss of individuation” (Bronfen 86). Based on the assumption that in the nineteenth century, death was considered beautiful, I will explore the Victorian family’s shared emotional and psychological support of the deathbed scene, particularly in the literary treatment of the dying and dead body, while also comparing it to our modern attitudes of death. Both the sickroom and the deathbed were important spaces in Victorian life and literature as “a peculiarly Evangelical section of the Evangelicals’ immense literary output came from a passion for the morbidly detailed contemplation of ‘the deathbed scene’” (Brown 457). Somehow, the abjection of the body is forced away in favor of a literary escapism in which the young, dead woman in the text not only stays beautiful, but is also

“frozen” in time to preserve her purity and innocence against mortal aging and sin. As Elisabeth Bronfen states,

By the end of the eighteenth century [the deathbed] takes a particular turn, given that that particular period’s fascination with death is contingent on death no longer being familiar. Death conceived as an external, alterior and potentially malign force, is recuperated into the cultural symbolic order by virtue of a narcissistically “healing” imaginary process. (92)

This was also an act of controlling the image of the corpse, but through the works of literature and illustrations, especially when a conflict arose between the new scientific way of seeing the dead body as opposed to the archaic and religious way of observing it. Whereas “Literary treatments of death reveal much about individual writers and the culture within which those authors write,” the fictional conventions of a good Christian death may recreate the dead body into a perfect version of its formal self and as an opportunity of the human being overcoming sin (Royer 998). It may also be used to protect the dying or sick by concealing the seriousness of their ailments when proper medical treatment was not yet available by ritualizing death in consolation literature, and making it seem romantic at a time when death occurred more in public sight. Thus, the dying body was exploited as a spectacle in terms of fictional sentimentality, as seen in the *locus amoenus* death of Nell Trent in Charles Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop*, or becomes a case study of caretaking and Christ-like death, as observed in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* in the example of Beth March.

Much literary research has dealt with the objectification of the dead woman, and the slow, dying process of the young, saintly character, who sets a moral example on how to live and

die well. Elisabeth Bronfen's significant work, *Over Her Dead Body*, describes culture's persistent fascination with images of feminine dying and death with a concentration on the nineteenth century's obsession with dead female bodies. One of her major arguments is the recurring appearance of the feminine corpse in art and literature as part of an established association of women with alterity and death. As Bronfen asserts, "If symptoms are failed repressions, representations are symptoms that visualize even as they conceal what is too dangerous to articulate openly but too fascinating to repress successfully" (xi). She even explains further that "if death is the measure and limit of all human knowledge and lends authority to life's meaning, the living can have access to death only through the death of another" (84). Just as we are morbidly curious about today's simulated death images, the nineteenth-century cult of female invalidism developed, even when traits such as "self-discipline, will-power and industriousness" were being explored during the wake of the Industrial Revolution (Bailin 12). Many Victorians valued illness for its rest and repose away from the stresses of daily life, and to accept a role of sickness as an identity during the nineteenth century was a social role for the sickroom was "staged to call forth (in the breach) the conditions under which both the intelligibility of realistic aesthetics and the viability of realism's social ethics of cohesion could be affirmed" (Bailin 1). Invalidism would also parallel itself with the affirmation of scientific method and the mainstreaming of medical practice in academic study. This can be seen in Harriet Martineau's memoir, *Life in the Sick-Room*. By embracing traditional womanhood, the popular reformist turned the traditional patient/doctor relationship on its head by stating that the patient has control over space, even in sickness. She also claims that suffering gives invalids greater insight to life, particularly about the transient nature of this earthly world.

Also, as “popular fiction heavily imbued with the religious temper of the times, the notion of the spiritual eminence [is] conferred by debility” (Bailin 11). Part of the allure of the invalid character was the religious assumption that those who were suffering were experiencing reprimand from God to the point that “dying of self-effacing inanition can . . . be seen as ‘the perfect representative of woman as Christ figure’” (Bronfen 218). This portrayal once again links to Kristeva’s theories of the abject, for the role of religion is also an aesthetic usage to disguise the horrors of death. When Christianity developed from Judaism, it took a new approach towards the concepts of cleanliness and defilement, and “various means of purifying the abject—the various catharses—make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion” (Kristeva 17). If death is considered chaotic, then the usage of the sublime as an aesthetic value allows us to view past boundaries of living and makes us hyperaware of our existence that we are mortal, but that there are also immortal forces out there stronger than us, for “I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control” (Kristeva 11). If the abject is the breakdown of what we know of life, then the sublime demands we must be aware of our own existence. Both concepts may result in terror and horror, but these are different types of experiences. To call something sublime means that it is too vast or powerful to recognize, and tests the limits of your ability to feel, to understand, to make sense of the world. It also does not obliterate consciousness as much as make you aware of both its capacities and its limits since we recognize that we are in two places (the here and beyond) in one moment. It is not supposed to destroy our existence but rather enhance it. It can be a feeling of pleasure and also pain because it shows our mortality through striking grandeur of thought and emotion. This is why the usage of art is interwoven with the idea of the sublime as a

way to handle the unsettling experiences of death and abjection. Immanuel Kant's notion of the sublime also describes the experience as boundless and containing an irresistible lawfulness (Kant 534). It pleases the viewer instantaneously without any sensorial or rational concentration involved.

The nineteenth century focused heavily on the sublime body and corpse, hence the popularity of unrealistic deathbed scenes where people appear to be set in beautiful repose rather than experiencing the abject realities of death. These literary texts were also influenced by religion and art aesthetics to cover up the horrors of nonexistence. And what are we to make of this invalid character who is "transported to heaven before she has become too contaminated by the world" (Bronfen 91)? Her incorruptible spectacle teaches believers the value of a good Christian death as her exile from earthly existence is "veiled under an expression of sublime serenity and the corpse turned into the allegorical figure of the angel" (Bronfen 91). The bodily horrors of wasting away and experiencing decay after death are disregarded since this innocent character cannot show any realistic signs of abjection as this would break the illusion of her holiness, and give reason for others to avoid her. Also, the dying and dead invalid can offer comfort to readers and viewers without focusing on the physical ravages of death. As a result, the creation of a safe aesthetic disempowers death anxiety, and makes death appear gentle, empathetic, sensitive, and even compassionate in comparison to the more modern images of dying we see today. Yet this beautiful spectacle can only exist at the expense of fetishizing the female corpse, and turning women into unnatural spectacles or relics for entertainment or comfort. These corpses are also infinite in their lovely depictions and thus are unrepresentable; at

least, in reality. The imagination would eventually suffer when confronting the realities of dying and death.

Yet do we, as readers, consider the dangers of the invalids themselves? Though an aesthetically-staged performance of dying is seen as a moment of control and power for the sickly character, there should still be fears that the corpse is unstable, even if this idealized image removes the terrifying (but natural) process of decomposition. Throughout history, we have always deemed the dead as a potential source of societal anarchy, taboo, and/or disease (Klaver xii). Yet there is still an obvious danger to *any* morbid relationship, a notion that a “beautiful death” can devolve into a ghoulish devotion towards those who have passed away, or even a noxious yearning for dehumanized bodies. We have seen this occur in a few historical cases where a bereaved survivor cannot accept separation from their dead loved ones, and they “may continue to relate to [the dead] as much as they in life” (Aggrawal 48). One notable case is Juana of Castile, whose inconsolable grief during the sixteenth century inspired her to keep the remains of her dead husband always close to her for at least 12 months (Aggrawal 49). This particular story fascinated writers, musicians, and artists of the nineteenth-century Romantic movement; she was even immortalized by the painter Francisco Pradilla in an artwork entitled, “Juana la Loca” and Manuel Tamayo Y Baus’s historical play, *La locura de amor* [The Madness of Love]. A nineteenth-century instance involves Princess Cristina Trivulzio di Belgiojoso, who concealed the corpse of her lover inside her home. This gruesome discovery was made “after the Italian Revolution of 1848 [when] she fled her home in Locate but left behind the body of her 27-year-old lover Gaetano Stelzi, who had died of tuberculosis earlier that year” (Peakman 264). Both women show a refusal to be separated from the dead, a resolute unwillingness to let go of their

lost loved ones. Yet, these women are considered, according to Anil Aggrawal, as “romantic necrophiliacs” for they choose to relate to these lifeless bodies as much as they did during their lifetimes (48). Still, nineteenth-century literature and art does approve of corpse worship, of a self-created reality where that the dead is still alive in another existence, but only if the horrors of death can be transformed into a spectacle of pleasure and beauty. Morbid curiosity and sensationalism becomes sentimentalism when you take another person’s suffering and painful experiences in death, and detach its abject descriptions for romanticism. As Marcia Muelder Eaton points out,

It is not merely that the description of death is *false* (many false descriptions are not sentimental); rather, it is that it is shallow or insincere or dishonest. Someone who found the description accurate would not be likely to deal adequately or appropriately with persons who experience death. (277)

Remove the disgusting process of decay and readers can now experience a safe and palpable example of love that surpasses time and space, despite the fact that the decomposition process promotes a rational usage of giving nourishment back to the earth. This positions Nell and Beth into the role of unfamiliar others who cannot possibly be human and also be a danger to our psyche.

Should we disassociate ourselves from these sickly-sweet girls featured in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Little Women*? Incorruptibility of the corpse is unnatural and desensitizing, and requires “a duplicitous form of viewing” (Bronfen 107). In fact, these nineteenth-century invalids are horrific, and can even be a danger to the living in their attempts to disown a realistic depiction of death. Why? Because these girls, even when alive, are inhuman. Evidence in both

books portray Nell and Beth as angels while their acts of dying and death are labelled as consolation literature to the mortal masses. These characters deceive readers because their bodies carry no description of horror; instead, they are beautified and thus convince the living to further communicate with the dead, and subvert death into an idealized and unattainable process (Bronfen 103). Passages featuring a beautified death could also tempt readers to value infinity over time, motionlessness over change and growth. Characters who are closest to these sickly girls, Grandfather Trent (*The Old Curiosity Shop*) and Jo March (*Little Women*) are altered by these angelic deaths, and yet, it costs them both their lives (Trent, physically; Jo, spiritually). It is because both suffer in their inability to “move on” after the death of their dearly departed while other characters continue with their literary lives, unaffected.

When we see a corpse, we are supposed to be struck by an immediate sense of our own mortality. We should not be able to relate to death, as it is not only the antithesis of life, but also represents “separation, mutilation, loss of identity, and the end of a biological process that is inevitable and irreversible” (Bluebond-Langner 47). Horrifying images of death, in fact, do us a favor, even if the feelings of abjection do not seem beneficial; by being disgusted by the appearance of the corpse, we are protecting our own self-identity. We reject this lifeless body to keep ourselves safe so that its image does not contaminate our sense of well-being. Yet when these sickly girls emphasize a non-reality no one could ever achieve, their uncorrupted bodies may trick characters and readers into thinking these sufferable acts of dying and death are desirable, but also that death itself should be “shaped by the dying person” so that he or she can “determine her or his individuality” (Bronfen 77). Today, we fear death because it supposedly threatens our distinctiveness, our existence. Nineteenth-century literature, however, may see

death as an elaborate spectacle or a certain autonomous power that the sick and dying can control.

By falsifying these angelic images as truth and marketing it as consolation literature to grieving readers, we promote an unhealthy attachment to the dying and dead body. Sentimental thoughts may seem to provide a protective function to readers (such as allowing a satisfying and therapeutic escape from the unthinkable horrors of bodily decomposition), but these examples also threaten to turn any dead person's legacy into a wish-fulfilling commodity. When it was believed that the deathbed scene accessed a truth of human existence, there is something so counterfeit about these saintly characters that cannot be overlooked, especially when one considers the intersection between the religious drama of the nineteenth century and our knowledge and scientific treatment of death today. Sentimentality, like sensationalism, abstracts the concept of death to whatever response it wants us, its audience, to feel. If death is a social aspect of our lives and a person can choose how to respond to this reality, one must consider what effects can happen if we disguise or ignore the genuineness of death in favor of fantasy or ignorance.

Though both deaths featured in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Little Women* are similar to the Evangelical tradition of dying a "good death," it is common to reexamine these passages today and critique them as being merely sentimental without considering the anxious attitudes expressed towards death during the nineteenth century. Authors, whose descriptions of dying and loss may be deemed as loving and optimistic, could have also been written in such a way to foster faith in eternal life at a time when religion was forced to justify itself during the age of Enlightenment (Turner 9). Yet, try as they might, writers could not get rid of that perpetual fear

of dying, for “death has always haunted the living” (Wood and Williamson 14). Instead, writers like Dickens and Alcott may have displaced their own existential fears by converting the images of their own dead loved ones into angelic creatures, and conceptualized these divine deaths as consolation to outside readers, for “Language is a condition of mediation designating the frailty of our relationship with the world and naming the loss that undermines all being” (Stamelman 6). Words also name what is gone and create feelings of nostalgia. Paul de Man agrees. As the literary theorist stated,

Poetic language names this void with ever-renewed understand and, like Rousseau’s longing, it never tires of naming it again. This persistent naming is what we call literature. In the same manner that the poetic lyric originates in moments of tranquility, in the absence of actual emotions, and then proceeds to invent fictional emotions to create the illusion of recollection, the work of fiction invents fictional subjects to create the illusion of the reality of others. But the fiction is not myth, for it knows and names itself as fiction. . . . The human mind will go through amazing feats of distorting to avoid facing “the nothingness of human matters. (18)

We as humans desire a representation of existence, and language tries to name this presence of nothingness by traversing reality into the stimulating world of art. However, the methods of choosing sentimentality over practicality ultimately betrays nineteenth-century survivors since no one should ever hope to achieve the same angelic results featured in these maudlin stories. For contemporary readers, we can laugh at the saccharine imagery of these saintly girls, or, do as I do, and view them as inhuman and monstrous for their illusive nature against the living.

Beautified corpses manipulate and undermine the nature of death in order to direct their readers towards an impossible image of the sublime. Besides, the abject cannot be openly expressed, since the abject is “A deviser of territories, languages, works,” making it both unpredictable and personal (Kristeva 8). Each person’s understanding of abjection depends upon their own *individual* experiences. In this manner, can consolation literature assume a common bond with its audience, as well as a shared sense of purpose? Is it even possible to represent a fictitious gathering of humanity? In the absence of a timeless arrangement of reward and retribution, we as a society should reexamine the value of our own existence and reflect on the merits that make life significant rather than focus on the artful performances of dying and death that cannot be achieved in reality. And though we may find the process of decomposition revolting, we should focus more on the reverent aspects of biodegradability and the integrities of having our human bodies return back to life through nature.

In Chapter One of my thesis, “Against Disease, Decay, and Degradation,” the significance and history of the deathbed showcases the powerful influence of the reformed invalid. Philippe Ariès’s book, *The Hour of Our Death*, argues the deathbed ceremony was used to familiarize oneself with dying while also acting as a final representation of the dying person’s life in the era of the “Tame Death.” During the nineteenth century, however, a sentimental revolution occurred which allowed survivors to actively participate in these services by acting on uncontrollable emotions of grief; this includes romanticizing the corpse as a way to soften the thoughts of death through the guidance of religious drama by incorporating Jeremy Taylor’s instruction manual, *Holy Dying* (1651). And while methodical views regarding the bodily decomposition process were being developed into academic disciplines, the Western populace

still desired to read literature infused with the principles of Evangelical Christianity. This chapter will also include Miriam Bailin's *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction*, a valuable source of information in regards to the understanding of how illness was constructed in the nineteenth century, along with Harriet Martineau's *Life in the Sick-Room*, a guidebook on invalidism that is complete with instructions on how to manage one's caregivers and suggestions on how to improve the quality of life.

In Chapter Two, "No Sleep So Beautiful and Calm," the death of Nell Trent in Charles Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop* is explored as it is arguably one of the most well known deaths in Victorian literature. As such, the sentimentality that surrounds this novel has been met by critics running the gamut from sincerity, as it represents early childhood death in industrialized Britain, to even mockery, with Oscar Wilde notably stating, "One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing" (qtd. in Ellmann 441). It is true that *The Old Curiosity Shop* insistently drags Nell towards her death "as a lesson about the universality of suffering and the need for compassion" (Preston xiii). Yet the loss of such a character is unrealistic, as Dickens desires pathos without including the realistic effects of death itself, such as the transitioning of a dead person to a corpse. Imaginatively recast as a sentimental image, Nell's body becomes imperishable, and allows the townspeople to cling to it without the horrors of abjection. To understand the framing and impact of Little Nell's death, one must also include the cultural manifestations of this particular infamous scene, both serious and satiric. Particularly noteworthy is George Cattermole's illustration of Nell on her deathbed in apotheosis, a description not included as text in the novel but guarantees her death as a perfect child sacrifice through incorruptibility.

Chapter 3, “The Most Abject Submission,” focuses on Beth March’s untimely demise in *Little Women*, in which it is regarded by some critics as remarkable in terms that it serves as a “self-sacrifice [that] is ultimately the greatest in the novel. She gives up her life knowing that it has had only private, domestic meaning” (Elbert 206-7). For a story which centers on sensible, moralized fiction, the sickly March daughter is subjected to a beautification process in which she slowly dies and literally becomes “the angel in the house,” the image of the woman who personified the Victorian feminine ideal. This romantic death also contrasts greatly with the domestic realism portrayed in Alcott’s novel, although it stresses both the importance of caretaking during the nineteenth century and the exchange of nurse-patient roles, as “the nurse both serves and authorizes the patient’s assertion of being, and in so doing, her own” (Bailin 26). Before Beth dies, she entrusts her role as caregiver onto her older sister, Jo, so she may receive her true angelic identity. In exchange, Jo recognizes the importance of domestic duties involving the sexual contract, as described in Nancy Armstrong’s theory that states women in novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth century were to “relinquish political control to the male in order to acquire exclusive authority over domestic life, emotions, taste, and morality” (32). Also included in this section is Mark Adamo’s recent opera representation of *Little Women*, where Beth’s deathbed scene is depicted as an emotional aria. As a contemporary audience, we are able to observe the idealistic tension of the Victorian deathbed scene as Beth’s dying and death becomes a theatric spectacle that delivers contemporaneity in comparison to the Victorian attitudes of death.

Lastly, my conclusion, “Dripping Reality,” speaks of the Paris Morgue, a location where Parisians and English travelers alike could indulge in the realistic but gruesome spectacles of the

dead. The morgue's original purpose was for family members and loved ones to come inside the building and identify unknown bodies found inside the city. However, it would be later transformed into a "theater for the masses" as it fit into a landscape where everyday life was fixed into sensational narratives. Vanessa Schwartz's book, *Spectacular Realities*, examines the various developments on how reality in the French capital was sensationalized and spectacularized through the usage of newspapers, wax museums, panoramas, dioramas, and early film. The public's fascination with actual death on display at the morgue, though, "may have resided in the complex mix of its desacralization of death and its insistence that a corpse can be observed in relation to a particular narrative context" (*Spectacular Realities* 48). This ghoulish *mise-en-scène* also permitted travelers to participate in viewings under the guise it was foreign. Unfortunately, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, illness was no longer looked upon with reverence, but rather, as a potential source of disease while memorial practices within the family began to avoid contact with the corpse after World War I.

It is often perceived that death is the only certainty in life, for all things that live will one day die. Hence death is an essential part of mankind's reality—how a person chooses to dwell on this fact is entirely up to him or her, although our experiences of death are quite distinctive to the historical moment in which we live. The complications of modern death and grief are that, "Without any ritual scripts at the hour of death, bereaved people were thought to be let down, by consequence, [and] distressed by psychological problems" (Bleyen 66). A forbidden public view of death has taken place in the contemporary Western experience because death is less about a biological reality, and more about a cultural decision determined by a number of factors, in part to "the crises bred by the disappearance of a traditional God, the traumas of global warfare, the

privatization of death, [and] the medicalization of dying” (Gilbert xx). Today, life expectancy is significantly higher than it has been in previous centuries, and people die in hospitals when medical care cannot be given at home. There is less societal involvement in the process of death, and displays of grief are often concealed in private rather than outright expressed in public. Nonetheless, modern-day readers should keep in mind the nineteenth century’s literary image of death, which preferred scenes disregarding the Gothic horrors of the dying or decaying body in favor of describing them with such beauty. It is too easy to accuse the Victorians of being fixated with dying, even though “evidence of the Victorians’ obsessive interest in death is as widely available in the imaginative literature of the period as it is in the theology” (Wheeler 28). By dealing with the objectification of the dead woman, the slow, dying process of the invalid becomes an artful performance, while allowing aesthetically-pleasing images to placate the disturbing realities of unavoidable death and the perishable, dehumanized corpse. Though we as human beings should not be manipulated by misleading descriptions involving dying and death, the nineteenth century created a manufactured product of human existence that was interlaced with the idea of the sublime. This allowed the Victorians to view past boundaries and make them hyperaware of their own reality outside of this earthly life without being threatened by fears of non-existence. Art, poetry, and literature during the nineteenth century also allowed an imaginative exploration of what frightens and fascinates us about death as “The aesthetic is a screen, a welcome and satisfying distraction, so that the aesthetic transformation of death and woman into works of art masks and denies the reality of the same” (May 243-44). Particular deathbed narratives, then, reassured and assisted against their fears of dying, while also making the experience of death meaningful, for “death was forever lurking; but a more widespread belief

in the Christian religion, with its promise of the resurrection of the body and of life everlasting, softened its terrors for many people” (May 4). Embracing religious drama at the deathbed would offer comfort when treatment and pain management was uncertain and vague. Before the revolution of the modern biomedical developments of the twentieth century, these morbid spectacles, both literary and historical, offer a unique arena of significance, purpose, and expectations before the inevitable shift from the deathbed to the grave. Comparing our modern attitudes of death to those experienced during the nineteenth century gives us an opportunity to see that the deathbed scene in Victorian fiction serves a bigger purpose than simply add melodramatic plotlines to the story. It acted as a way to preserve the memory of dying and dead loved ones, as a satisfying depiction of a last goodbye, and the heavenly promise of a future existence. Its fantastic portrayal also acted to veil the horrifying realities of death, including bodily decay and nihilism. Hopefully, this thesis will prove how both time periods distort the realities of death, but with reasonably different methods.

Chapter One

“Against Disease, Decay, and Degradation”: The History of the Deathbed and Its Nineteenth-Century Spectacle

Every one of us experiences death in our own personal way. However, cultural values and art also define our attitudes towards dying and grief. For example, most of us see death's central place in life as being abject; Julia Kristeva's theory that the human reaction to horror, especially one directed towards the corpse, reveals an exposed breakdown in meaning (3-4). During the nineteenth century, however, the Victorian aestheticization of death includes the iconic deathbed scene, which played an important role in the works of fiction, as well as religion. While our modern sensibilities may think the Victorian's relationship with death is odd, it is because death was a familiar event directed inside the household, and elaborate rituals were created as a way to cope. Popular reading materials in the nineteenth century relied on ways to promote pain and suffering as the final test of Christian virtue, while heavily-edited stories featured in Evangelical memoirs and journals stressed the melodramatic affairs with death. We also see a strong sentiment directed towards the character of the young, saintly invalid, who sets a moral example on how to live and die well in fiction. Literature, such as Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Dying* and Harriet Martineau's *Life in the Sick-Room*, were read as ways to educate the dying about what to expect, and also offer prescribed prayers, procedures, and attitudes that would all lead to a "good death" and eventually, salvation. Though these two books are separated by two centuries, they provided Victorian audiences with practical guidance for dying, as well to those who are attending their deathbeds. These ritual manuals reflect Western culture's past fears and hopes for the occasion of death. It is for this reason that the deathbed scene afforded Victorian family members a unique form of control from fears and anxieties involving dying and death that

promises a reunion in heaven with loved ones. Though death became familiar because of disease and rapid urbanization, Victorians “could, indeed, celebrate it, for no other stage of life demanded such elaborate rites of passage” (May 3). Despite a spiritual ritualization of death, the nineteenth century was also not immune to the unpleasantness one experiences during the final stages of dying. It was an accustomed notion that softened the image of death, especially when a conflict arose between the new scientific way of studying the dead body versus the archaic and religious way of examining it.

The nature of death and civilization’s awareness makes it the center of several religious organizations and traditions. Customs that focus on death are an element of every culture around the world, and yet, “Historically, the dead body in the West has always been fraught with all sorts of cultural vexations about spectacle, taboo, [and] violence” (Klaver xii). Our fear towards the corpse is a visceral experience that connects to Kristeva’s theory of the “abject,” a term assigned to whatever upsets, disturbs, or weakens our sense of living, and is situated outside the symbolic order (1-4). When one is forced to face abjection, it becomes an inherently traumatic experience for the viewer, even though people personally encounter versions of the abject daily in the forms of human excrement, vomit, urine, saliva, and blood. The reasons these bodily discharges disturb us is because they threaten our sense of cleanliness and propriety, thus becoming taboo. Furthermore, our daily leakage of wastes and corporal fluids signifies a physical wasting away that will eventually lead to death: “Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadere, cadaver” (Kristeva 3). For us living today, we see this corporeal waste with fear because techniques in medicine could not prevent this event from occurring.

Of course, the corpse is the most primary example of abjection because it falls out of the symbolic order after the dead are no longer a subject or object, which is a critical test for our identity. To confront a corpse we recognize as a social being, but is not animated, is also to confront the reality that we, too, will continue to exist but only in a state of non-living. If we want to live without being infected by abjection's powers of horror, we must violently reject what crosses borders and confuses our state of being so that it does not contaminate us. Our actions of disposing dead bodies are not done just to avoid contagion, but also to shut down the realization we are all organic matter that will eventually decompose after our own deaths. Even those dying are considered taboo, not only because their failing bodies are a reminder they will eventually die within a proximate time, but there also tends to be self-vitiating signs of abjection occurring to the body when it undergoes the eventual stages of death.

We may have a scientific attitude in regards to dying and death because of our ways of conceptualizing disease, in part because "positivism became the foundation of experimental, empirical approaches to biological science and medicine in the nineteenth century" (April 65). Under duress, the Victorian sickbed rejected symptoms of illness in favor of "principal nosological methods [that] had to do with the observation of external and subjective manifestations rather than on hidden causes," and as a result, the "diagnosis was founded on the patient's own subjective account of himself and his illness" (Bailin 9). At a time when the causes and cures of illness were still largely unidentified, physical examinations performed by doctors kept up with conservative community norms and values. While death in the modern Western world is often hidden or portrayed as being sullied and indecent, the nineteenth century discards abjection and allowed families to view death as an attractive viewing experience: "The deathbed

scene . . . was a familiar literary convention not only in prose fiction but also in narrative poetry and biography” (Wheeler 28). Dying and the deathbed in Victorian fiction would be framed didactically, as such literature taught the audience how important it was to live properly and how to die well. Though the deathbed is an iconic scene in nineteenth-century fiction, it is easy to think of the portrayal of all deathbed scenes as exclusively Victorian in nature. The first records of the deathbed scene, however, are actually deeply rooted in the documented history of death itself.

According to scholar Philippe Ariès, the attitude towards death has changed greatly throughout history. The first era of death he proposes is entitled the “tame death” of the ancients, because during this significant period, the idea of dying was considered stoic as people met their demise with calm acceptance since it was so near and constant. Ariès only explores the beginnings of death from “that of the early Middle Ages, as illustrated by the death of Roland,” although the concept of tame death is much older, possibly dating back to that of prehistory as descriptions of death were not always chronicled (5). The early period of the Middle Ages is also distinctive in its imagery of knight nobility through oral traditions. In fact, “The medieval saint was borrowed by monastic scholars from a secular and chivalric tradition that was itself of folkloric origin” (5). This later tradition became a source of the documentation of death scenes, which are available for study. *La Chanson de Roland*, the oldest surviving major work in French literature, is significant in its study of historical death because of its description of how knights died. Medieval soldiers died by a familiar ritual as the event of one’s death was not experienced as a grandiose act. Rather, they were guided by an internal warning. As Ariès states:

Death is governed by a familiar ritual that is willingly described. The common, ordinary death does not come as a surprise, even when it is the accidental result of a wound or the effect of too great an emotion, as was sometimes the case. Its essential characteristic is that it gives advance warning of its arrival. (6)

Supposedly, a character dying in literature knew exactly when he or she would perish, regardless of the judgment from outsiders; this also includes the opinion of the doctor. The warning mostly came through inner certainty, and sometimes “everything took place according to a schedule that was arranged by the dying person himself” (Ariès 7-9). When one knew he was about to die, if he attempted to avoid the warnings of his own death, he would be exposed to mockery because death was always sent out with a warning, according to the ideas of the ordinary people. In this way, it gave the dying person enough time to prepare for his death. It should be no surprise, then, that the deathbed scene is, at least in retrospect, as old as the concept of the era of tame death itself. It was created for one to make the necessary arrangements when it was time to leave this earth for the next life, as if, “an unshakable adherence to Prohibition and Law is necessary if that perverse interspace of abjection is to be hemmed in and thrust aside” (Kristeva 16). In this manner, the deathbed ceremony creates borders for the dying to familiarize themselves against the unpredictability of death, while also expressing that the life of man is not individual destiny, but instead, a lost link to the broken chain regarding the entire human race.

The tame death still resonates in the Victorian deathbed scene with its unique set of rituals that have continued to endure for thousands of years. The proper method to die during this ancient era was to lie down in a recumbent position with one’s arms outstretched in the form of a cross while lying east, facing heaven. The dying person would then express his regret at leaving

life, and remember his loved ones and belongings. Any person in attendance – parents, friends, children, and neighbors – articulated their regret at the impending death, and asked for forgiveness for any wrong they might have caused to the dying person (Ariès 14-15). Everything was preplanned, but performed with simplicity as death was an uncomplicated act; those who were departing this life understood what was expected of them in a manner that would appear scripted and unemotional, even by today's standards. Furthermore, the public nature of the tame death still manifests itself into the nineteenth century, despite objection from some doctors who complained about hygiene issues as loved ones occupied the bedrooms of the dying. Those moribund during ancient times had no choice of being watched by a live audience, for "people died frequently, in plain view of their townsmen or fellow villagers; in such times, it would have been difficult to die a private death" (Wood and Williamson 16). And the spectacle of death — real, authentic death — was inescapable for viewers at a time when conditions were unthinkable vile compared to our sanitized world of the twenty-first century.

Western civilization would later adopt an uneasy attitude towards death during the Middle Ages as slight modifications gave the familiarity of death a more dramatic and personal meaning. Humankind had become greatly socialized, and Christianity's influence on literature resorted to showing death as a punishment for one's sins, while the last moments of life became a religious arrangement. The elements and characteristics of the conventional deathbed scene were codified in the *Ars moriendi* ("The Art of Dying"). These Christian guidebooks, accompanied by woodcut illustrations and first appearing in the fifteenth century, explored the drama that took place in the bedroom when dying was viewed as a performance battle in order to save one's soul from damnation (Leget 314-15). Death was the crucial event in human

experience with the Last Judgment linked to the individual's biography. A heightened fear for the fate of the departing soul was also experienced when the Church promoted a belief that a physical being could continue to exist as one's soul, despite the body succumbing to decomposition. As a reward for a pious life, death was a "release" from earthly existence (Brennan 42). Many features of the Victorian deathbed are based upon this latter traditional Roman Catholic model of the *Ars moriendi*, such as the belief that judgment by God was particular to each individual. Consequently, the task at hand became to learn how to die, how to die naturally, and without much pain and suffering. It is for this reason that the manuals offered the protocols and procedures on how to die well, so Christians could face death without fear. The new iconography of the *Ars moriendi* also brings us back to the traditional image of the deathbed during the same death, but the simplicity of the ceremony had changed into a visual spectacle reserved for the dying man alone.

Literature that offered consolation concerning death would continue for many generations, becoming tradition, but it would reach its pinnacle with Jeremy Taylor's *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying* (1651). Released as a two-volume devotional set, this instructional guide based itself on the faith and direction of how to cleanse the soul in a religious fashion, and also how to overcome bodily and spiritual pain. From Taylor's perspective, death was looked upon optimistically since eternal life can finally begin after death. Even today, *Holy Dying* stands as the tradition's finest work, and was widely read well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: "Taylor's work was the last great book in this genre. No subsequent author equaled Taylor's artful rendering of the tradition or his masterful use of both classical and Christian sources on dying well" ("Art of Dying" 72). One of the main principles of Taylor's manual was

keeping the deathbed in mind, as well as encouraging people to meditate and reflect on the mourning scenes they witnessed:

There is nothing which can make sickness unsanctified, but the same also will give us cause to fear Death. If therefore we so order our affairs and spirits that we do not fear Death, our sickness may easily become our advantage, and we can then receive counsel, and consider, and do those acts of virtue which are in that state the proper services of God. (119)

Taylor would strongly condemn the Roman Catholic approach to dying well, as Catholics “disregarded the importance of a life well lived and instead relied entirely upon the absolution of the priest via sacramental anointing” (*Patience, Compassion, Hope* 36). The cleric, instead, focused upon the need for Christians to engage in a life of constant repentance, so that “he that desires to die well and happily, above all things must be careful, that he do not live a soft, a delicate and voluptuous life; but a life severe, holy and under the discipline of the cross” (Taylor 38).

Holy Dying would not be forgotten; by the nineteenth century, the work re-experienced “a revival of interest” when conduct books regained their popularity in Victorian culture, just as the deathbed scene remained highly ritualized and public (*Patience, Compassion, Hope* 35). However, Romanticism spawned a response characterized by passions without limit or reason. The act of expressing uncultivated emotions rearranged the Western culture’s ideals on mourning, and resulted in a transformation of the way families should express their feelings. A death in the family now meant, for the first time in history, the disappearance of a unique and

irreplaceable individual from one's life. This death would not be tolerated silently, but articulated through an over expression of grief:

The death of the other aroused a pathos that had once been repressed. The ceremonies of the bedroom or of mourning, which had once been used as a barrier to counteract excess emotion – or indifference – were deritualized and presented as the spontaneous expression of the grief of the survivors. (Ariès 610)

The ceremony of the deathbed scene continued during the nineteenth century as a way to keep the fear of death at a familiar barrier, just as the mourning process changed for its attendees. After all, fear towards losing a loved one was not focused on him or her dying, but rather, a dread was expressed towards their physical separation on earth. In the words of Elisabeth Bronfen:

Death emerges as that moment in a person's life where individuality and absolute rarity could finally be attained, in a singular and unique severment from common or collective affiliation. Death began to be conceived as the moment where an inherent though truth could apotheotically be fulfilled, where an otherwise incommunicable secret could be made visible. (77)

An aesthetic developed that allowed an imaginative exploration of dying and death that allowed illness to be romanticized in order to reject abjection's frightening impact, while also allowing spontaneous actions of grief to be expressed in the ritual. Although Kristeva mentions that the primary response to bodily horrors has always included the rites of religion and morality, the nineteenth century was no different, even though mourning rituals became more ornate for those acting as dramatic participants (16). For example, survivors at the deathbed scene articulated

themselves through extreme emotion, such as loud expressions of praying and crying. These rituals desacralized the defensive maneuvers taken against the rising cultural tide of religious doubt in contrast to “the rise of scientific rationalism, [as] a secular hope for immortality and reunion with loved ones became more important than churchly images of heaven and hell” (Strickland 155). Evidence of these Romantic expressions of grief can also be found in nineteenth-century literature, poetry, and paintings in which heaven is expressed as a place where the family can be reunited.

Family records of the nineteenth century also show the act of Taylor’s “holy dying” was difficult to achieve in practice, considering one of the most important moments of the deathbed scene was obtaining consciousness during the final moments of death, or else the dying would be “in no state of mind to be thinking of salvation” (Horrox 98). Unfortunately for those in the nineteenth century, “the causes and cure of disease were still largely unknown, [and] treatment was idiosyncratic and highly individualized”; as a result, doctors struggled with the challenges of the sickroom (Bailin 9). End-of-life care tried focusing on spiritual preparation as a way of offering comfort in the face of death, but the distress of diseases could still alter a person’s behavior, thus threatening their prospect of deliverance to the hereafter. To counteract this dilemma, the early and mid-Victorians believed suffering from pain acted as a purifying experience, and the idealized version of the literary deathbed was used as a way to promote the “good death.” It also helped ease the process of mourning as it helped survivors respond to their grief and “Represent the Christian ideal rather than the historical reality” (“Victorian Death” 233). The topic of religion could repress what Victorians hoped to conceal in the abject realities of dying and the corpse.

In order to properly examine the sentimental treatment of the dying or dead body during the nineteenth century, we must also acknowledge what life was like in both the literary and real-life depictions of the sickroom. In *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction*, author Miriam Bailin draws upon real-life accounts of illness to support her argument that the sickroom's purpose in literature was as a place of privilege, where it is both a retreat from society, and where conflicts can be confronted and resolved. Consequently, the infirmary is a safe haven from the real world, where the formulaic plot includes characters whose physical suffering is symbolic or, at least, related to the moral and social tumult of the public world. Yet once these characters fall ill, they adjourn to the sickroom, and begin a transformation process in which they are able to reemerge back into society as more socially-involved individuals. This typical scene "is staged to call forth (in the breach) the conditions under which both the intelligibility of realistic aesthetics and the viability of realism's social ethics of cohesion could be affirmed" and with it, sickbed scenes could explore critical stages of self-development, emotional turmoil, and plot constructions of the nineteenth century (1). Also, while bodily sickness is discussed, the conditions of the body remain vague, allowing the "occasion for the benefits they elicit and the desires they legitimate" (7).

Of course, these sickly characteristics also occur in deathbed scenes, but on a much more romanticized scale: "The sickroom scene of necessity recalls or directly leads to that more famous Victorian *mise-en-scène* of high drama and ultimate meanings – the deathbed. It is from the perilous proximity to death that illness gains much of its affective force" (Bailin 16). Illness described in literature, whether fatal or resolvable is compelling, not only because sickness is a cultural experience shared by all, but because in a way, it becomes an etiological condition

where the author can imagine what illness the character is going through, especially if it concerns social ills that may be possible causes for the disease. The conflict in the nineteenth-century novel can then explore pathological ideas between the new scientific ways of studying the dead body against the old, religious way of thinking. Whereas Miriam Bailin's literary examples (Charlotte Brontë, Dickens, and Eliot) make strong cases of what sickness represents during the nineteenth century, they also display a romanticized version of what ailment meant to their characters. These literary examples also did not require detailed explanations involving the actual sickness being described in the text. Instead of a direct look at abjection towards the sickly body, sickness is discarded in favor of "a kind of forcing ground of the self – a conventional rite of passage issuing in personal, moral, or social recuperation" (5). The arrangement of the sickroom in fiction was a means and subject matter of realism since illness created questions about the relation of the body to mind.

In addition, the deathbed scene usually occurs when a character must experience "a larger movement towards recovery and competition," where only death can fulfill the promise of absolute wholeness towards a character's development (Kucich 55). This usually occurs when the writer wishes to explore a celestial approach of transformation that cannot be achieved in the pragmatic examples of the sickroom. The writers would then make use of their Christian beliefs about death, both rich in myth and ritual:

It would, I think, be difficult to overestimate the sway that the Evangelical reading of pain had over the Victorian representation of illness. Like the sentimentalists and romantics who linked disability to superiority, the Evangelicals located privilege in a condition of suffering and frailty. (Bailin 10)

The depiction above ties in closely to “The Angel in the House,” a term coined by Victorian poet Coventry Patmore, about the heavenly qualities of a Victorian woman. This idealized image was supposed to be a “woman who has no existence outside the context of her home and whose sole window on the world is her husband” (Hartnell 460). As far as being an “angel,” Patmore portrays women as spiritual beings, whose main purpose is to bring men closer to God with their attributes including selflessness and self-regulation. A Victorian woman’s reason for living, then, was expressing unconditional love towards her family, and the saintly invalid character, usually too pious to live, is an extreme example of this character. As Ann Dowker points out in “The Treatment of Disability in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Children’s Literature,” the majority “of these saintly or reformed invalids are girls. They rarely become disabled adults: either they die young, or experience a miracle cure” (par. 2). Most of these virtuous characters could not make it through the entirety of the novel without dying in a tragic, yet beautiful way, therefore providing a link to the conventions of sentimental literature. And while this saintly child could not reemerge into society, she would transform into a literal “angel in the house” where there is no place for confronting a painful, disturbing, or ugly death, especially towards characters who exhibited the Evangelical virtues of suffering. Thus, “fiction of the period helped to solidify the belief that the pale and helpless invalid represented a model of pure, almost saintly loveliness,” therefore giving these female characters an identity agreeable to the Victorian standards of domestic divinity and beauty (Domínguez-Rué 61).

The impact of the deaths of young children in fiction is also significant because such losses were not uncommon during the nineteenth century: “The sentimental portrayal of the deaths of children had a considerable emotional impact on a public who often had to endure such

bereavements in their own lives either as parents or siblings” (Correa 146). Today, we often associate death with old age, and are moved by sudden instances that rob the young of life. Nineteenth-century children were obviously at risk for several diseases that have been eradicated or medically managed in the twenty-first century, such as scarlet fever, diphtheria, measles, small-pox, and tuberculosis. At a time when mortality was associated with now commonly preventable diseases, many Victorian parents took the opportunity to introduce their children to death at an early age by explaining it was a blessed event, and the need to live a proper Christian life is vital in order to achieve the good Evangelical death (*Death in the Victorian Family* 29). As a result, literature from this time period also connoted childhood death with positivity by highlighting the spiritual strength of the dying child, and persuading others to learn from it. By promoting deathbed scenes involving stricken youths, many literary deathbed scenes involved young, saintly characters as allegories of innocence who are unable to survive in a wicked, corrupt world. To modern sensibilities, these tales may seem cloying, but in an age with high child mortality rates, they honored what many Victorian readers had known as familiar tragedies.

The beauty of illness and death during the nineteenth century also extends to real-life events when the Victorian cult of invalidism began to correspond with the affirmation of scientific method and the mainstreaming of medical practice. Harriet Martineau’s *Life in the Sick-Room*, an autobiographical reflection of illness, is a hallmark of Victorian proprieties surrounding death and dying because of its constant lens on experiencing illness. Martineau, a writer and English reformer, was diagnosed in 1839 with a uterine tumor and was bedridden for six years of her life. By 1844, she created a book whose content is not about portraying life in the sickroom as a place of difficulty or sorrow as many believed it to be, but rather, as a reprieve

from the troubles of daily average life, or as she called it, “a separate region of human experience” (125). In spite of the pains of bad health, the sick go to a place where they are able to gain many “sweets” from their disabilities; one in particular is Martineau’s belief that invalids are able to reflect on life with greater insight than others due to the transient nature of life in opposition to the permanent setting invalids must experience in their sickrooms. It was for this reason invalids have a better ability to grasp certain truisms that cannot be as easily observed by the healthy because the latter are always contemplating the world surrounding them. According to the reformer, “We have a stronger tendency to speculate on the movements of the minds engaged in the transaction of affairs, than on the rate of advance of the affairs themselves” (81). Martineau is able to confirm this as she was able to reinvent herself from being just a popularizer to one whose new identity doubled as both a reformer and as a spokesman for other invalids.

Life in the Sick-Room “offers insightful metacommentary on the representational challenges faced by invalids,” as Martineau operates under assumptions about the invalid’s identity and what they can represent to public society (Frawley 60). This gives them a degree of power not previously explored in history. By examining her own illness so candidly, Martineau initiated a public debate about illness, cures, and what the status of an invalid is to society:

When Harriet Martineau declared it her duty “to suffer for other people’s information,” she sought to divest *Life in the Sick-Room* of some of its status as personal testimony and attribute to it an air of dispassionate objectivity. Many of her friends and visitors were evidently as convinced as Martineau herself of her status as a heroic martyr. (Frawley 218)

Part of the allure of the invalid at the time was the religious basis that those who were suffering were experiencing reprimand from God. While a critical change in thinking about death and disease was occurring, and where pathological anatomy was being recognized and even more commonly explored, the enduring beliefs of vitalism were still strong in death scenes in literature. As mentioned before, Martineau was influenced by the Evangelical reading of pain in which invalidism became a privilege in terms of suffering and fragility, considering it could be looked upon as discipline by God to make one pure: “It is clear that the conviction I speak of arises from the supposition—indispensable and, I believe, almost universal,—that pain is the chastisement of a Father; or, at least, that it is, in some way or other, ordained for, or instrumental to good” (30). Despite the emergence of medicalization and scientific study on the rise, one cannot ignore the influence the Evangelical readings of suffering still had over how Victorians depicted illness in literature (Bailin 10). This was because ways of looking at the dying or dead body were to either see it as being the humble remains after the departure of the soul, or simply as a probable source of disease (April 76). Martineau’s status as a well-respected lecturer, who had the first-hand experience of ailment so vividly described in her autobiography, came as no surprise to readers, who would accept her theories of invalidism being a divine condition. This furthered the belief that dying is purely the separation of body and soul.

The allusions to sickness and religion continue in the chapter “The Life of the Invalid,” where the sequestered are compared to the angelic creatures known as the “Seraph,” a type of celestial being in Abrahamic religions described, according to Martineau, as “watching the bringing out of a world from chaos, its completion in fitness, beauty and radiance” (76). Observe, also, how the reformer chooses to compare herself and other shut-ins of belonging to

the highest order of the celestial hierarchy rather than be associated with the acquiescent “angel in the house.” After all, there is daily toil and hastiness in life, but the invalid gets the opportunity to find permanent rest to observe the transient nature of ordinary living:

Nothing is more impossible to represent in words, even to one’s self in meditative moments, than what it is to lie on the verge of life and watch, with nothing to do but to think, and learn from what we behold. Let anyone recall what it is to feel suddenly, by personal experience, the full depth of meaning of some saying, always believed in, often repeated with sincerity, but never till now known. (77)

What makes Martineau’s book so fascinating in terms of the deathbed scene is her views on the sick body and how it will succumb to death. During her period of invalidism, the reformer developed a certainty she would die based on the medical opinion of her doctor, and yet, she does not shield away from morbidity in her book. The idea that death can be familiarized and not feared is noted in Chapter 3, “Death of the Invalid,” where Martineau states how the invalid must accept a certain form of lucidity to all events in life, including the act of dying. After all, unlike his or her healthy counterparts, the invalid has an obvious proximity to death, considering their bodies are already failing them. Yet this still gives them a stronger power of observation and understanding of the concepts of death than the healthy would ever be able to understand:

But how does death appear to those who rest halfway between it and life, or are very gradually passing over from one to the other?

. . . In such cases, I imagine the views of death remain much what they were before, though they must necessarily become more interesting, and the

conception of them more clear. I know of no case of any one who before believed, or took for granted, a future life, who began to disbelieve or doubt it through sickness. (110-11)

While other critics will later argue over the value of Martineau's work, with one anonymous reviewer for the *British and Foreign Medical Review* recommending Martineau should just submit to her fate as an invalid instead of discussing "morbid" vanity over her condition, her commentary about being close to illness and death is absorbing because it is similar to Ariès's concept of the tame death where only the dying described in literature knew when he or she was going to die (Frawley 218). For Martineau to not fear death, to create a religious experience from her sickness and familiarize herself with it as being something good and pure not only gives the isolated invalid power as the one true authoritative commentator of public life, but also as a reliable source over sickly conditions, especially when death is involved. Invalids like Martineau must understand the mysteriousness of dying and what death is actually like, taking into account that they have the clearest vision of it. This made her work all the more recognizable to its readers in an age where death was unfamiliar and feared (Bronfen 92). Influential people like Martineau convinced others dying was not frightening because of her acquaintance with it, while also allowing other invalids to concentrate their efforts on the present.

The purpose of manuals like the *Ars moriendi*, Taylor's *Holy Dying*, and Martineau's *Life in the Sick-room* provides information to readers that are meaningful and relevant. Their objective is to supply orderly consideration of the way people should live every day of their lives through a religious framework. Reading about dying was not a morbid exercise, but rather an empowering way to ease the unavoidable fears of dying. This is relevant to Kristeva as she

argues the powers of horror act as protectors in order for us to avoid confronting the sphere of nothingness, while religion and art also purify it: “On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards” (2). This is because dying and dead bodies are viewed in society as wretched as excrement or other wastes in need of disposal, especially if they contain infection or disease. The nineteenth century, nevertheless, familiarized itself with death by creating an elaborate, romantic ritual via the traditional deathbed scene that rejects the corporeal horrors of decay in favor of ideas wholly based on religious concepts of the soul, immortality, and paradise; this includes beautifying the corpse and representing death not as frightening, but as the next step to a reunion in heaven. By reading Taylor and Martineau’s Christian manuals, a comforting sense of guidance is offered to all parties involved during the deathbed scene, while they are able to confront the existential challenges that dying may provoke. These books also point to a reality beyond life where the dead are not lost forever, but rather, “the horror of personal absence and bodily decomposition that is actual death ceases to be death when imaginatively recast as a commemorative or sentimental image and becomes instead consolatory illusion and art” (Finney 243). This is an advantage where we can still love the dead person, imaginatively, without loathing the corpse.

The failing body in the nineteenth century, then, should not be seen as morbid, but as going through a transformation of exaltation that should be desired, where it is “moving and beautiful like nature, like the immensity of nature, the sea or the moors” (Ariès 610). As a result, the literary body in the deathbed scene was seen as sublime, and anyone observing it was not put through a crisis of faith because the beautified corpse depicted an image that placed itself above

the realistic paradigm where abjection has no place. Literature was also able to adapt Evangelical customs of religion while consequently making the corpse clean, safe, and even attractive. The depravity of sickness and death were all written under a faith-based, morality-regulated society that still recognized disease, but within an appealing guise of religion. Dying on the deathbed was not supposed to be frightening because elaborate rituals, based on the chastisement of pain and illness, provided stability and refuge at a time when scientific progress was on the rise. The deathbed scene in nineteenth-century literature, with its transcendental process of the dying or dead body, includes saintly invalids undergoing the stages of redecorated death as manufactured proof to readers that to give themselves a good death by means of a devout existence meant that death was not frightening, that God is real, and that there is an afterlife with loved ones, after all.

Chapter Two

“No Sleep So Beautiful and Calm”: Victorian Sentimentality and Satire in Charles Dickens’s Little Nell

Nell Trent’s death in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is one of the most recognizable deathbed scenes featured in Victorian literature, and for good reason: Charles Dickens’s story of a destitute thirteen-year-old and her grandfather roaming the countryside in order to escape from their evil landlord reads like a Victorian fairy tale. After all, the basic conflict of the story is a battle between an innocent youth pitted against a dwarf; yet, towards the end of the story, the tone changes from whimsical venture to tragedy without a happily-ever-after ending for its protagonist. Overcome with the physical exhaustion she endures on her travels, Nell dies. Michal Peled Ginsburg notes, “Whereas the ending of many other Dickens novels is normally not of great readerly interest (being the predictable tying of loose ends), here the end commands readers’ attention to such an extent that it seems to dominate the entire novel” (Ginsburg 85). The death scene is naturally distressing as readers should expect it to be, but the state of the dead body is not. Even as Kristeva links the image of the corpse as being the primary example of abjection, Nell’s body carries no description of horror; instead, it is set in beautiful repose. The last few scenes in the novel sentimentally reject death as a state of failure, and instead, showcase it as an escape from reality, and suggest that the Romantic child should remain a permanent icon of innocence. Although *The Old Curiosity Shop* would later be accused of being too cloying by critics such as Aldous Huxley and Algernon Swinburne, Nell’s death at the time it was published in 1841 was met with passionate reactions as it aestheticizes the historical attitudes toward premature death caused by disease and urbanization.

In the last few chapters when the whereabouts of Nell and her grandfather are finally

discovered, Kit, a boy who works for Grandfather Trent and is close to Nell, and others go to find them. Yet after confronting the grandfather and requesting to see the little girl, it is discovered that she is “dead. No sleep so beautiful and calm, so free from trace of pain, so fair to look upon. She seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; not one who had lived and suffered death” (528). The description of death is saintly (it is pointed out in Chapter 72 that Nell lies dead for two days despite no decay occurring to her corpse), although it is George Cattermole’s illustration included in the publication of *The Old Curiosity Shop* entitled, “At Rest,” that catalyzes the dead body as an iconic image. A description of the artwork can be read in the instructions Dickens gave to Cattermole:

The child lying dead in the little sleeping room, which is behind the open screen. It is winter-time, so there are no flowers; but upon her breast and pillow, and about her bed, there may be strips of holly and berries, and such free green things. Window overgrown with ivy. The little boy who had that talk with her about angels may be by the bedside, if you like it so; but I think it will be quieter and more peaceful if she is alone. I want it to express the most beautiful repose and tranquility, and to have something of a happy look, if death can.

. . . I am breaking my heart over this story, and cannot bear to finish it.

(*Letters* 35)

Cattermole, a close friend of Dickens, had much influence over the illustrations featured in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, even if he was known more for his architectural pieces rather than for his depictions of characters. The artist succeeds in portraying the lofty, antique backgrounds of the curiosity shop, although it was “only at the end of the story, for the sequence of four engravings

of Nell's transition from this world to the next, did [Dickens] call on Cattermole to put forth sustained effort" (Cohen 128). It can be argued that while the artist's "At Rest" is not particularly engaging (Cohen further states on the same page that "the modern viewer is unlikely to be moved even by the published print of the dead heroine with her broad, crudely delineated face, and her elaborate surroundings with their hackneyed symbols of immortality"), there is still much to observe over the illustration. It clearly depicts Nell's angelic transformation as her body prepares itself for the hereafter. In her state of apotheosis, she is smiling, as if experiencing a good dream and is not dead at all; an hourglass sits on a table, its flow of sand complete and representing the idea that her time on earth is up, while the window next to her is open to ensure her soul has escaped the room and taken flight. A deathbed aesthetic such as this would be appealing to those in the nineteenth century who participated in the cult of the beautiful death, especially images of children experiencing sickness or death. It was a familiar, although controversial, portrayal in many Victorian paintings and photographs as a form of record for a dead child or loved one (Swedlund 183). Like Cattermole's "At Rest," funeral photography often characterized themes of "last sleep," where the deceased was placed in a recognizable domestic setting. A good example of photographed deathbed scenes is Henry Peach Robinson's photograph, "Fading Away" (1858), which depicts a dying girl surrounded by her family. Despite its staging, the image was met with both criticism for its morbid theme, and extreme popularity in not only England, but America, as well (Gernsheim 79).

Whether from reading about Nell's death, or by observing Cattermole's illustration, her true angelic form is revealed in the beauty of the corpse. As readers, we have proof she will be placed in heaven just as custom dictates to the typical Evangelical deathbed scene, as the book

includes numerous allusions to the girl being “spiritual, so slight and fairy-like” (13) and also “an angel messenger” (314). She is more beatific than the typical Victorian heroine, and since she lives so appropriately in the novel, she is rewarded with a good death instead of having to endure a moment longer on this dejected earth:

She died soon after daybreak. They had read and talked to her in the earlier portion of the night, but as the hours crept on, she sank to sleep. They could tell, by what she faintly uttered in her dreams, that they were of her journeying with the old man; they were of no painful scenes, but of those who had helped and used them kindly, for she often said ‘God bless you!’ with great fervor. Waking, she never wandered in her mind, but once, and that of beautiful music which she said was in the air. God knows. It may have been.

Opening her eyes at last, from a very quiet sleep, she begged that they would kiss her once again. That done, she turned to the old man with a lovely smile upon her face – such, they said, as they had never seen, and never could forget – and clung with her arms about his neck. They did not know she was dead at first. (530)

In spite of the constant foreshadowing of Nell’s end, particularly in her unusual attraction to cemeteries, her companionship to elderly men, and encountering the deaths of other children on her travels, the conclusion of Dickens’s novel sparked passionate reactions from its readers when it was published in 1841. This was most likely because the Victorian reading audience was intensely moved by the beautiful description of Nell’s death while recognizing their own familiar experience of death (Malkovich 90). According to Laurie Harris, Nell’s death “inspired public

grief” (137) so much so that “in England her demise unleashed a sentimental furor. Carlyle was overcome, Daniel O’Connell and Lord Jeffrey wept bitterly. Tears were the order of the day” (Pattison 76).

These emotions of grief were most likely provoked by the means of public release that the novel chose to use. *Master Humphrey’s Clock*, a weekly periodical created by Dickens’s publishers, used the process of serialization to help build momentum for *The Old Curiosity Shop*’s climax. Dickens’s calculating usage of whether Little Nell lives or dies proved to be a commercial success for the story, and also an opportunity for readers to feel communal anticipation over what happens next to the little girl. At the end, people were so invested in Nell, Dickens was swamped with letters pleading him to spare her life; even the “Americans had once waited on New York’s docks for the final number of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, shouting at the approaching steamer, ‘Is Little Nell dead?’” (Hart 102). Today, it is astonishing how affected the first readers of *The Old Curiosity Shop* were towards a fictional character, yet one must consider that Nell is a product of sentimentality, the condition or quality that is now considered excessive or affectingly over-romantic. At this time, “sentimental novels present a representative surface that claims to provide moral instruction through interpretation, especially through its characteristic bodily displays of weeping and suffering” (Gao 87). A deathbed scene like Nell’s would help Victorian readers to deal with their own grief by imagining the world being deprived of lost innocence, while also teaching how important it was to live properly and to die well, considering the girl dies in peace.

When Dickens wrote about Nell Trent, the writing style was dependent upon a usage of feelings, or as a guide to truth, where she stood as a character of childhood innocence. Nell is too

good to be threatened or hurt, and yet her sickness and death are important to Dickens's teachings. For one, she exists as a moralizing tool on how to live properly so that readers may learn how to experience an Evangelical "good death," considering the burdens she accepts with virtue. Second, her dying influenced people at a time when death was not yet institutionalized by the advancements of medical technology we have today. Instead, the community featured in the novel defends themselves from fears of death by participating in a poignant funeral scene, such as the one featured at the end of the novel. For its reading audience, it was to be read as consolation and to allow public mourning for those willing to participate in the belief that death was a transcendent and romantic experience.

Nevertheless, a cultural shift occurred later in the nineteenth century when sentimentality would represent shallow, unsophisticated feelings that went against logic and reason, and be seen as a literary device used to encourage exaggerated responses disproportionate to the actual situation at hand. The sickroom soon became a scene of exposing illness rather than reconciling emotions: "The late nineteenth-century also saw the transformation of the representation of illness as adaptation to illness as deviance" (Bailin 142). While sickroom scenes would not disappear in literature, sentimentality was later regarded as a cheap trick by writers:

Sentimentality is excessive feeling evoked by unworthy objects; it is falsely idealising; it simplifies and sanitises; it is vulgar; it leads to cynicism; it is feeling on the cheap; it's predictable; it's meretricious. In short, it's an emotional and aesthetic blot on the landscape. (Bown 1)

The Old Curiosity Shop was later looked upon with distaste, especially directly towards the exaggerated death scene of Nell. Everyone from writer John Ruskin to the prominent magazine

Atlantic Monthly had something off-putting to say about the girl's death, although it was Oscar Wilde's own witticism that resonated the loudest amongst the other critics. According to him, "One would have to have a heart of stone to read the death of little Nell without dissolving into tears of laughter" (84). Aphorisms such as his showcase our modern attitudes towards death: though the story of a defenseless, young girl threatened by evil is timeless, Nell's death scene is too ostentatious, especially when the Evangelical customs of how important it is to live properly and die well have vanished from Western society. Mourning, for us, has become a private affair, and a funeral scene like Nell's is too public and excessive for our tastes. A contemporary audience cannot enjoy its effect because survivors no longer "read the death of the deceased as a moment of truth in meaning" (Bronfen 84). Today, we define bodily decomposition as actual death, and know that her body cannot be reconstructed into a perfect version of its previous self.

It is not even the act of Nell dying that makes the ending insubstantial for modern-day readers as the death rate of children in nineteenth century was higher than it is today, and also more common in Victorian households until the invention of modern medicine. Margarete Holubetz points out that "The death rate ranged above 20% and child-mortality was appallingly high, the [deathbed] scenes must have effected a powerful reader identification" (14). Even without acknowledging these statistics, it is clear that Nell's death is also a symbolic protection against the loss of innocence as the girl is too good for this sinful earth. It is the way her corpse is able to defy the ravages of nature after death via the decomposition process that is preposterous, both in text and illustration. To address the issue again, Dickens writes that Nell has "been dead for two days" (530), yet there is no mention of rot, swelling, or discoloration occurring to the body. Also in Chapter 71, the phrase "she was dead" appears four times, as if Dickens must

remind the readers she is gone, despite his idealistic description of the corpse. For this, Nell receives the pathos of the deathbed scene with the luxury of appearing to be asleep:

She was dead. No sleep so beautiful and calm, so free from trace of pain, so fair to look upon. She seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; not one who had lived and suffered death.

. . . And still her former self lay there, unaltered in its change. Yes. The old fireside had smiled upon that same sweet face; it had passed like a dream through haunts of misery and care. (530)

The repetitive image of Nell “sleeping” softens the harsh reality of death, despite Dickens resorting to melodramatics by restating again and again that she is dead. And while the description of other corpses featured in the novel (especially those regarding children), are abject in nature, Nell’s body does not elicit the same response. If one were to only view Cattermole’s “At Rest” without any context to the illustration, he or she may assume Nell is, in fact, sleeping and is not experiencing a state of death.

It is also not just Nell Trent’s sensational death that is criticized as being sentimental; other forms of disparagement towards *The Old Curiosity Shop* are often directed towards her existence as Dickens’s placeholder of childhood innocence. As G.K. Chesterton states, “It is not the death of Little Nell, but the life of Little Nell, that I object to” (54). Why? Because no one as sweet as Nell Trent could possibly exist, nor should, as unrealistically clichéd as her personality is, considering she acts more like an angel than a child. The novel’s villain, Daniel Quilp, even gives this cherub-like depiction of her: “Such a fresh, blooming, modest little bud . . . such a chubby, rosy, cosy, little Nell . . . so small, so compact, so beautifully modelled, so fair, with

such blue veins and such a transparent skin, and such little feet, and such winning ways” (73). Her littleness is stressed so often, it is as if Dickens is trying to convince the reader to adore Nell just as much as he does, so that they, too, will wish to comfort and protect her from the evils featured in the novel. This manipulation goes on even further when Nell is constantly surrounded with attention from other characters, yet is taken advantage of by almost every person she encounters, such as Mrs. Jarley or Mr. Codlin and Short Trotters. Those who are supposed to tend to her, such as her grandfather or Mrs. Quilp, fail to do so. Instead, the reader is to participate in a strange exercise of voyeurism when reading about the sufferings of a little girl:

Unlike the typical sentimental novel, which hopes to shape the reader into the sentimental hero through sympathetic involvement, the privacy that Dickens emphasises in this scene perversely identifies the reader, not with Nell and her grandfather, but with the detached position of the sadistic voyeur, reaffirming the distance between the sufferers and the ostensibly sympathetic spectator. (Gao 96)

Nell’s age is also an indication of her preciousness, as she is both presented as a timid child (despite being thirteen-years-old), and perceived as a sexualized, young woman by the likes of Quilp and Dick Swiveller. Readers may be surprised that Dickens writes so candidly about the wanton exchange of an adolescent girl while also persistently letting the readers know she is not eligible for marriage because of her childish form and demeanor. It does, however, make the text more of a fairy tale as it displays Quilp’s troll-like obsession to obtain the girl, while Swiveller makes unwarranted attempts to force marriage upon her for imaginary riches. Both characters deliver a personal threat to Nell that plays upon her idealized femininity and susceptibility to the story, and for this, “Dickens makes the situation explicit by imposing all the weight of the

menace upon a pubertal girl” (Shelston 151-52). It is for this reason that Nell experiences the highest level of victimization that constantly violates her purity and virtue, as “Dickens extends his erotic conjunction of purity and brutality even to the prose of the death scene itself” (Kucich 64). Her corpse, too, is eroticized as a spectacle for the entire town to see; just before she is placed into the grave, everyone mentions her beauty and youth before saying goodbye to her. Her dead body, separated from violence and pain, becomes an object of desire instead of one of repulsion. For contemporary readers, we should realize that “our culture has made pedophilia inevitable and also criminal—we must love the child sexually and we cannot” (Kincaid 37). Nell’s sacrifice is uncomfortable for today’s readers as we also sexualize children in our culture, whereas for the Victorians, the concepts of pedophilia was not as outspoken or determined.

Thus Nell’s existence is a conundrum: she clearly does not fit into this world as saintly as she is, yet she is more grotesque than any of the other characters featured in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, including the antagonist Quilp. Of course she is similar to him in terms of caricaturization, with her representing absolute goodness while he represents absolute wickedness, but it is only Nell’s corpse that is incorruptible, whereas Quilp’s death is much more conformable to reality. In the end, the dwarf’s end is as bleak and as lifeless as the many other deaths described in the novel. In Chapter 67, he is castigated by the elements of nature and drowns while his body is described as being “a corpse,” a “ghastly freight,” a “deserted carcase” and “a blazing ruin” (500). These are all typical responses of abjection towards the cadaver. It is also clear Quilp goes through a state of life and death in the passage, and is “left to be buried with a stake through his heart in the centre of four lonely roads” although it is also possible he “had been secretly given up to Tom Scott” (539). A rather strange ending for a corpse, but at least it is dismal and

realistically depicted in nature.

Hablot “Phiz” Brown’s illustration included in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, “The End of Quilp,” is also vile and violent: “One of the most striking, however, is the weird water-scape showing the corpse of Quilp washed ashore—a vista of riparian scenery which, for the sense of desolate breadth and loneliness it suggests, it would be difficult to excel” (Kitton 81). Quilp’s body in the illustration is difficult to make out because of how well it blends into the swampy background, but the dwarf is there, dying alone, with his head thrown back in agony in a possible state of rigor mortis. It also appears as if he is being fed into the reeds and being returned back into the earth, a symbolic way of portraying bodily corrosion. As a moral standpoint, “[Quilp’s] death is a *danse macabre* in which all elements play wildly with the corpse,” as if to remind readers the frailty of own their lives and how vain the glories of earthly life can be (Auerbach 86). The purpose of the medieval *danse macabre* is also to remind viewers that death is not only inevitable, but also the great equalizer, and it is no secret Quilp is a depraved character.

Yet his illustration is also comparable to that of the iconography of the fallen Victorian woman as fictions about women and suicide became more prevalent during the middle-class society of the nineteenth century. Recurring representations of dead women and water pointed out that suicide was considered a female malady, thus “Quilp is given the death that his life deserved – such a moral notion was commonly found in the images of ‘fallen’ (usually drowned) women” (Cregan-Reid 86). This explains why Tom, Quilp’s boy abettor, finds the idea of the dwarf drowning amusing in Chapter 39, considering the suicidal act is a gendered act in Victorian culture; and though the dwarf may seem monstrous, his death proves he is human after all.

Nell's life and death, however, lack the verisimilitude a reader in modern times can feel sympathy towards. As Aldous Huxley puts it, "The overflowing of [Dickens's] heart drowns his head and even dims his eyes; for, whenever he is in the melting mood, Dickens ceases to be able and probably ceases even to wish to see reality" (*Vulgarity in Literature*, 1930). For someone who is always so attached to death, Nell is untouched by its horrors. She is never dirtied by the decay she encounters, even though she engulfs herself into its world. She is even bewitched by abjection, but instead of being swallowed by it as readers may expect, she has the power to reject it even after her own death. Her body never becomes "a cropper, [a] cesspool" as one would expect (Kristeva 3). At least death reveals Quilp's corporeality, thus validating his own mortal existence, and for Dickens to have the girl's dead body go against all preconceived notions of decomposition in favor of beauty and decorum completes the final act of dehumanizing her. She is resorted to being a curiosity, much like the other belonging in her grandfather's shop.

After reading *The Old Curiosity Shop*, one may wonder why he or she should care about Little Nell when she hardly has any human qualities. She is not relatable; she is a two-dimensional character whose existence can be summed up by a few certain traits. Her death is even more implausible as "Dickens could not write in a way that would convince us that death or the dying are like this, for they are not" (Eaton 276). We as a modern-day audience respond to Nell's deathbed scene with aversion because it is not recognizable as real-life death as it is too sanitary and perfect for our contemporary views. When Nell's body is recreated into a perfect version of its former self, it represents a hopeful vision of the afterlife while her body proves the dead girl has overcome sorrow and finds repose, even though the corpse literalizes the breakdown of identity and is "the most sickening of wastes" (Kristeva 3). Making Nell's death

appear as sleep is manipulative and deceitful, especially in comparison to other deaths featured in the novel as death is not only the end of existence, but also the removal of a social being in society.

Yet Tyson Stolte believes the reason that Nell's body remains purified after her death is evidence of "spiritual immortality," the nineteenth-century belief that was popularized in Britain at a time when there was still an attachment to the body after death. During the 1830s and 1840s, the body's role in mental sciences was an important element of the discussion in regards to the mind's immateriality. It was believed, by some, that the mind was involved in the spirit of man, and writers at this time depicted scenes of either spiritualism or materialism in regards to the dead body. While Dickens does speak upon the decaying process of death,

Nell's death in particular is a clear effort to insist on the immateriality and immortality of mind, to uphold what was widely seen as the standard (albeit beleaguered) position in psychology's struggle over the relative significance of our mental and physical beings. (Stolte 188)

The Old Curiosity Shop does feature many themes of decomposition involving other bodies, although the theme of immateriality is also prevalent in other corpses, too. For example, an old woman in Chapter 17 tends to her husband's grave because she enjoys the flowers that grow from his burial spot; in Chapter 53, a child explains to Nell that his brother's grave is actually a "garden" that birds enjoy visiting. The dead continue to exist through the acts of recycling their bodies back into the earth, yet they must *decay* in order to sustain future generations. It is a particular sacrifice that is unassuming, unspectacular, and even undesirable, but one that proves dignity is not lost, even in death. Decomposition is the natural process of dead animal or plant

tissue that provides the requirement for life to continue and thrive, and one that should be respected, as Dickens showcases with these scenes featuring the graves of the dead husband and brother. The perennials grow from the husband's corpse, almost as a silent gesture of love to his living wife; the dead brother's burial place brings a smile to his sibling's face; all acts of love from beyond the grave. It is in this way that the dead and living can still be connected, and how the dead can continue to exist, even in a faceless/bodiless state. Both these acts of love, to grow flowers and gardens, transcend the dead's own mortal existence, but in a way that adheres to nature and reason.

And yet, Nell's body avoids the reality of putrefaction. As the novel constantly remarks about her body being subjected to physical and mental anguish, that she is of "earthly shape" (531) even after death, Dickens keeps the girl's body perfectly preserved. This way the townspeople can fawn over her as they place her in the grave so she will be as "pure as that newly fallen snow that [will cover] it" (533). While much of "Victorian culture might insist on the insignificance of the body, [and] its treatment of the corpse," Dickens still keeps Nell's body safe from decomposition (Stolte 198). For him to constantly speak upon the necessity of decomposition while unable to show the same natural response towards Nell's dead body is unjust. Instead, he creates an unrealistic depiction of death with no signs of pain, of sickness, or true abjection and expects people to mourn for the lost girl, even though today, we do not identify the corpse in terms of beauty or undergoing peaceful countenance. By making Nell's body imperishable allows the townspeople to cling to her body as a congenial effigy before finally entombing her.

However, the problem in reading Nell today is that she was always meant to be a

representation, not just of childhood innocence, but also as a literary version of someone Charles Dickens personally knew in his real life. In regards to “art imitating life,” the creation of Little Nell is historically given to Mary Hogarth, Charles Dickens’s sister-in-law who “died suddenly – an event that was to leave its mark on his next book, *The Old Curiosity Shop*” (Preston vi). Being the younger sister of Catherine Hogarth, Dickens’s eventual wife, Mary entered the Dickens’s household on Doughty Street to offer assistance to the newly-wedded couple. Dickens was attached to Mary as she became “an intimate friend, a privileged sister and domestic companion” and yet, on May 1837 the girl suddenly died, most likely from either heart attack or stroke (Kaplan 92). According to John Forster, Dickens’s grief and suffering over the girl was so intense, it affected him for years, and gave critics reason to believe Mary was the inspiration for *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Creating Nell might have been a possible coping mechanism for Dickens while also allowing him to express his idolization of Mary in terms of immortalizing her into the figure of the perfect little girl. Dickens draws on the emotional experience of the death of his sister-in-law and, instead of focusing on the abjection of her loss, he creates a fictional desire to see her undergo an angelic transformation. Such imaginative and poignant reading is also a moment of consolation, not just for the author, but for the reading audience who want to imagine the same experience towards their dead loved ones as “In creating Nell, Dickens pickles Mary, immortalising her purity” (Lester 22). Dickens basically recreates death as a way to reject the realities of his sister-in-law’s departure from existence.

Of course Nell’s death is idealized and naïve, but it also represents the purity of children, and the sense that a child might be better placed in heaven than having to experience the difficult childhood of the early to mid-nineteenth century. After all, “The romanticized notions of the

Victorian child set children apart from adults and childhood and children became something to be protected and preserved” (Malkovich 88). Thus the idea of a romanticized child was that he or she could die young, and that their death was an act that preserved their purity and innocence, just as “Dickens’s conception of Nell’s unassailable purity posits an ideal of such immaculate separateness that only death could suffice to insure it” (Bailin 90). The death of a child is described as being unlike any other loss known, and for a parent to lose a part of themselves in such a manner is devastating. However, a story like Dickens’s could reinforce the Christian belief that the most certain way of getting into heaven is to die innocent and young (Achté 177). Therefore the death of Little Nell is an excellent representation of the Evangelical ideal of what is perceived as a “good death,” while also offering comfort to the bereaved so they could come to terms with the loss of their child in hopes they would be reunited in heaven without focusing on the physical ravages of death.

So how should Nell’s corpse be categorized in terms of the human reaction towards death? Obviously it is not abject: the typical response to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of distinction between subject and object. While abjection is felt towards the death of other children in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens surpasses the imagery of Nell’s body deteriorating in favor of using sleep as a metaphor for death. Her “sleeping” illustrates a common belief as old and constant as the ritual of the deathbed itself so that she can retain a lifelike appearance that is able to mirror her integrity (Ariès 22-23). To show the girl in a state of putrefaction would depict her as human, or worse, deformed. Any form of Nell, dead or alive, cannot create unwarranted fear and discomfort to her audience as her sacrificial death is a lesson on how to live and die well. She remains incorruptible so that the funeral becomes a spectacle to

signal to others the acts of repentance or awe, just as the entire village turns out to see her buried. Yet this extravagant procession is fitting, considering Nell's body is treated the same as it was when she was alive: all eyes on her because of her youth and beauty. Yet despite such admirable traits, it still places her in the same category as the grotesque. As Dickens states,

In writing the book, I had it always in my fancy to surround the lonely figure of the child with grotesque and wild, but not impossible companions, and to gather about her innocent face and pure intentions, associates as strange and uncongenial as the grim objects that are about her bed when her history is first foreshadowed.
(Preston ix)

In this way, does Nell's imperishable corpse become uncanny? Signs of corrosion against her body are not discussed in the text, nor does Nell's death inspire the normal reactions of horror typically seen towards the dead. Instead, she takes on the same properties of a wax doll: lifelike but not alive, and yet, still able to get a whole town to view her body despite her death. In a sense, Nell's body disconnects from reality in favor of transforming into a tableau vivant, which is similar to the figures seen in Mrs. Jarley's wax museum:

Like Punch, Quilp's figure-head, and Mrs Jarley's waxworks, the [body] of Nell . . . [is] deceptively life-like, presenting a semblance of life without life itself. The sentimental body, which ought to elicit a sympathetic and moral response to its genuineness, is ultimately transformed into another "insensible countenance," an uncanny and duplicitous representation to confuse and confound the physiognomist. (Gao 103)

It should be noted that in Chapter 29 when Mrs. Jarley wishes to attract visitors to her wax museum, she exploits Nell's beauty by applying artificial flowers to the child and having her sit in a cart next to a wax figure, The Brigand. This way both of them can be dragged throughout town on display as a form of announcement to the waxworks. In the end, it is Nell who attracts the attention of the crowd, not Jarley's figure, and people flock to the museum to see her. Later, the girl is kept in the exhibition room while the Brigand returns back to the land of living, alone to advertise in their once-shared cart. This makes Nell interchangeable with the other wax figures, and her experience at the museum not so much different from her funeral in terms of exhibition. Gao writes, "The profusion of puppets, waxworks, figure-heads and reanimated corpses . . . reflect the fact that, in the nineteenth-century, the sentimental body was becoming increasingly replaced by uncanny representations" (103). Yet while the concepts of the abject and the uncanny are similar in terms of familiarity (uncanniness initiating a sense of familiarity when it should not, while abjection initiates a loss of familiarity even though it should be familiar), this should not apply to Nell's corpse. Her death does not create a cognitive dissonance where aspects of the corpse will be familiarized, but are ultimately rejected. Nell's body remains just as it did when she was alive: untouched and pure.

Rather, her dead body is going through the act of sublimation, and the corpse becomes an aesthetic object to fetishize. Dickens's novel is tied to religion and art, where the two movements decontaminate the abject: "The various means of purifying the abject—the various catharses—make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion" (Kristeva 17). Sublimation, according to Kristeva, is our attempt to cover the collapsed meanings connected with abjection, where literature is a

space for both the abject and the sublime to exist: “Through sublimation, I keep it under control. The abject is edged with the sublime. It is not the same moment on the journey, but the same subject and speech bring them into being” (11). In this way, the sublime keeps abjection at boundaries, especially in our human effort to maintain structure in a world of uncertainty. Taking into account Immanuel Kant’s notion of the sublime, Nell’s corpse at the end of the novel is elevated to an otherworldly status typical of the romantic deathbed scene seen in literature during the nineteenth century. It is the kind of infinite experience that creates a desire to submit to religion because her imperishable corpse proves she is not just any innocent child lost to death, but a martyr returning to heaven. Her body is not reduced to the inevitable failure typical seen in the human corpse as it becomes proof of the hereafter, and “the image of such a child, however, cannot die, for it is static unless marred by an adult's hand and this too illustrates the impact of society and culture upon the image of the Romantic child and childhood” (Malkovich 28-29). Nell is unspoiled even after death because she can never be imperfect.

Nell’s death is a sacrificial event that offers comfort against mankind's struggle with death, especially at a time when religion and science were at odds with each other, and when writers and philosophers were interested in how the mind works in the early days of psychology. Not only does Nell reject the powers of abjection, but she is still alive in the afterlife as proof in the incorruptibility of her earthly shell. These days, the corpse’s powers of fascination rely on “the titillating charge that emanates from dead bodies, this fascinating allure of the authentic” because death is kept hidden from public view (Linke 157). Most of us are not surrounded by death and dying, but we have evidence of what it should be like through

scientific evidence. Yet at a time when death was familiar to the Victorians, when they were surrounded by the deaths of loved ones, Nell's death is exquisite and offers promises of heaven. This is something more valuable for them to read upon, as it shows signs of saintliness and reunion in the afterlife. It was "this consolation [that] was grounded in a specifically Christian hope, and was not merely a symptom of evasion, repression or wish-fulfillment in the face of death and bereavement" (Wheeler 2). The corpse's image may efface and substitute reality, but it also symbolizes the promise of a future existence as a message-bearing icon. The body also translates a message to its audience about a realm that exists outside of earth where heaven does exist and that family members will see each other again.

Today, we must consider *The Old Curiosity Shop* a product of its time, especially in terms of the way the story was released in serial publication and its reassuring aesthetic towards premature death. Holubetz attests, "Due to the ritual dramatization of death prevailing at the time, most nineteenth-century death-bed scenes seem intolerably melodramatic to the modern reader. Death in the Victorian novel is generally conceived as a spectacle" (15). Families idealized and desired the deathbed scene, even though it was not always obtainable; hence why people turned to literature for signs of salvation with hopes that their loved ones would enter heaven, especially when the mortality rates for children were considered high by modern day standards. Little Nell does not deserve to die based upon her extreme virtue, but by turning her into an angelic spectacle, Dickens renders her death evocative. It will inspire repentance or awe, not just within the community described in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, but within the reading audience, as well. Romantic scenes such as this were "manufacturing proof of the salvation of departing heroes and heroines, depicting rapture on their faces as they caught their glimpse of

the wonders of Heaven” (*Death in the Victorian Family* 37). At a time when death could not be avoided, literature such as Dickens’s could provide some relief from existential anxiety.

The Old Curiosity Shop was also created as solace to be read for a release of feeling, especially for those experiencing loss. As affirmed by Dickens himself: “When I first began . . . to keep my thoughts upon this ending of the tale, I resolved to try and do something which might be read by people about whom Death had been, with a softened feeling, and with consolation” (*Letters* 75). Rejection of scientific thinking is replaced by the romantic speculation of the corpse, and criticizing Nell’s death ignores the Evangelical ideals of a Victorian good death: “*Old Curiosity Shop* is nevertheless a highly topical work, one in which Dickens can be seen responding with a sense of urgency to pressing issues of the moment” (Schlicke 89). Nell dies in peace even after what she endures on her travels, thus making her death more tragic, considering she is now free from a wretched earth that she never belonged to in the first place. Dickens was able to write such scenes because a relationship between author and reader was created when there was a heightened response between both parties who were willing to invest in prepared emotions to the emotional literary scenes of sentimentalism, especially in an age when the deathbed scene today is viewed as extravagant. To a modern reader, Nell’s submissiveness and integrity may be tedious, although it does show the influence that the Evangelical death scene had in early to mid-nineteenth century literature in terms of aesthetics and as a moralizing agent of the good death: “Dickens’ novel affected readers as it did because, whatever Nell’s virtues, her existence is inseparable from the idea of its loss, as the pun in her name implies” (Kucich 63). Today, we pathologize Nell when we should recognize the necessary measures the early nineteenth century used to guard themselves from the horrors

of abjection when diseases could not be properly eradicated during this time. Instead, the Victorians resorted to using the softening images of the corpse in order to cope with the realities of illness and dying as family members searched for signs of a peaceful countenance upon the corpse as proof that their souls had seemingly entered heaven.

Chapter Three

“The Most Abject Submission”: Dying with Dignity and Sacrifice in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*

Beth March’s death in *Little Women* is considered remarkable in terms that it serves as a “self-sacrifice [that] is ultimately the greatest in the novel. She gives up her life knowing that it has had only private, domestic meaning” (Elbert 206-7). Published in 1868, *Little Women* is collectively known as a coming-of-age novel featuring four sisters that details childhood to womanhood during nineteenth-century America. However, Beth is a peculiar character when compared to her other sisters for she has no ambitions; instead, her life is preoccupied with dying as she is “Removed from everyday concerns, reconciled to a short life within a safe, known world” (Keith 33). Too sweet and perfect to live, she slowly dies at home and becomes preserved as “the angel in the house.” There is a reason for Alcott’s decision to make Beth a static character as her Christ-like death is reminiscent of the teachings of Jeremy Taylor’s *Holy Dying*, and while it is also too easy to make comparisons between Beth March and Nell Trent of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, their deaths are strangely different. For one, Nell’s imperishable corpse is relished as corporeal evidence of an afterlife, whereas Beth’s body quickly disappears after death. There is no mention of anointing, laying out for view, or even burying the body. Instead, Beth’s corpse is “made ready” for burial, but disappears quickly from discussion. And, while Little Nell’s corpse has more of a public resonance with its characters and reading audience, Beth March’s death is circumscribed so fully within the home, it manages to “tame” her sister, Jo. *Little Women* would also contrast greatly with the casualties experienced during the Civil War, when “soldiers worried deeply about their own remains, especially as they began to encounter circumstances that made customary reverence all but impossible” (*The Republic of*

Suffering 62). Bodies of loved ones not returned home traumatized family members as it shook deeply-held beliefs of the good death. The Civil War was also the first major conflict to be photographed extensively, bringing horrific images back to family and friends who would have remained unaware of the abject casualties experienced on the battlefields.

To begin this chapter, it is important to note that *Little Women* is an American text, and that its customs on mourning and burial may be different from those in Britain. However, according to historian Lewis O. Saum, during “the first half of the nineteenth century the American sensibility was dominated by death,” based on evidence from the macabre subject matter that frequented the letters of frontier settlers (qtd. in Ariès 447). These documents were written to relatives about family matters that include births, marriages, and death. Children in particular were dying at high mortality rates, just like their European counterparts, and while these records appeared in the form of letters during the Movement West, family members would write to ask for details on the death of loved ones as they did not have the privilege of attending the hour of their death. In this way, “death was still a spectacle of which the dying man was the director and performances varied in reality” (Ariès 448). Those who were present at the deathbed scene were necessary heralds, and the “mid-nineteenth-century American culture treated dying as an art and the ‘Good Death’ as a goal that all men and women should struggle to achieve” (“The Civil War Soldier” 6). It is for this reason that death would become a central aspect of popular culture in America during the Civil War era.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that Alcott resided in the region of Massachusetts when *Little Women* was written. Victorian America, a noteworthy offshoot to the European culture during the mid and later nineteenth century, was predominantly experienced in larger

regions such as New England, which happens to be the setting for the classic book. The theme of child death in literature is persistent in the United States as it was in Britain:

It was through the early nineteenth century tract societies that the trope of child death made its debut as a mass phenomenon, mostly due to the improved technology of printing. Whereas the popularity of the earlier narratives was great, they remained books for local communities. With the growth of the printing industry, the narratives were widely disseminated. (Pasulka 184)

Many British memoirs involving dying children achieved great popularity in the United States, as “Calvinism was on the wane as the leading religion in America, and many flocked to evangelical versions of Christianity that allowed the expression of more emotions and sentimentality” (Peter 66-67). Yet American writers differentiated their own literature from those read in Britain. The American child death trope “include an emphasis on democratic values, the conception that the poor and industrious were imbued with virtue and could attain salvation through a change of heart, and an aversion to the upper classes” (Pasulka 185-86). The narratives still shared similar aspects of Romanticism, such as children being born without sin and the white lower class always being virtuous. Works such as *The Dairyman’s Daughter* and the “Memoir of Miriam Warner” became literary staples of American children’s literature that continued the evolving image of the sentimental deathbed scene.

Little Women, originally published in two volumes in 1868 and 1869, may seem like a stark contrast to Dickens’s British sentimental novel, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, especially when Alcott’s novel is without a villain or any serious battles. However, Dickens was a mighty influence for Alcott in her own creative writing, as “it was during those formative days at

Hillside that the young, stagestruck Louisa May Alcott was captivated by the works of Charles Dickens” (Shealy 15). Considering that the British writer generated a cultural solidarity among his postcolonial readers, who shared his sentiments of literature, it makes sense that both sentimental and domestic writing, like *Little Women*, would be idealized in the United States at this time, based upon their roots in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophy and science: “Sentimental and domestic novels catered to a growing audience of girls and young women eager to read stories that spoke to their concerns and presented real, believable heroines involved in everyday life’s worries” (Magee 61). Also, while *Little Women* engages in domesticity, it still pays homage to Dickens, too, as seen in the example provided in Chapter Ten when the girls are in the garden, engaging in a “secret society” that is based on Dickens’s first novel, *Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837). According to Daniel Shealy,

Like the example used in *Little Women*, the actual *Pickwick Portfolio* contains poetry, notices, riddles, romances, fantasies, and autobiographical sketches. It is certainly no surprise, however, that the most striking and interesting literary efforts come from the imagination of Louisa May Alcott. The teenaged Alcott, unrestrained by the demands of editors, publishers, and the public, could spin out stories and ideas to suit her own desires. But the material she produced for these domestic newspapers does indeed give a hint about her future talents. What did she produce? Her desires led her to the type of material she would later write as an adult: sentimental poetry, romances, gothic fantasies, fairy tales, and domestic scenes. (15)

Alcott is renowned for her work as a much-loved author of children's fiction, and like Dickens, was concerned with social issues while using her stories to offer a conscience to her readers. The recent discovery of Alcott's adult thrillers secretly penned under a pseudonym (first published between 1863 and 1869) do show a conflicting interest of writing under the sensational form; a similar theme is found in *Little Women* when Jo March struggles to write her own blood-and-thunder stories. As Alcott disclosed to a friend, she understood that her writing talent was in sensationalism and not sentimentalism: "I think my natural ambition is for the lurid style. I indulge in gorgeous fancies and wish that I dared inscribe them upon my pages and set them before the public" (Pickett 107). It is as if Alcott was caught between her public image of being a children's author and continuing the sensational stories she loved to write.

Unfortunately, as *Little Women* rose in popularity, Alcott realized that if she were to remain successful and keep her reputation, she could not put her own name onto her sensational stories. Instead, she continued her public image and kept the sensational writing under a secret identity. Her impatience with writing sentimental fiction would become obvious when, in a letter written in 1878, she claims she continues to write children's fiction because "it pays well" (*Selected Letters* 232). As time would go on, Alcott would continue to write more sentimental fiction (with her latter works becoming more mawkish throughout the years), but at least *Little Women* was partially based on her experience with her sisters, and is still surprisingly modern with its embracement of female ambition.

Nonetheless, *Little Women* is most sentimental in the characterization of Beth, who resembles Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Both characters, saintly and passive, have literary deathbed scenes that are the perfect tool for spreading Victorian morality and

Evangelical Christianity. Both characters also experience death with mawkish sentimentality, as if to prove that in a nineteenth-century novel, “The only *safe*, safe female is a pre-adolescent girl dying or dead” (Fiedler 267). Yet there are differences, as well: in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, its heroine plays the part as exemplary victim, and whose demise is considered one of the most well-known deaths in Victorian literature as it was a great consolation for many families in which child death had occurred. The disparities between the Victorian response to Little Nell and our own have also been repeatedly described and explained. Beth’s death in *Little Women*, however, seems to serve a quieter purpose: too angelic to survive in Alcott’s more realistic fictional world, Beth dies and the story pushes onward without her. Analysis of her deathbed scene, too, is less frequent than Nell’s, but one cannot dismiss the rather marvelous character of the invalid March sister, who is reminiscent of that angelic stock character that is frequently seen in nineteenth-century writing:

Beth is set apart from the rest of her sisters by being entirely without ambition or self-interest. Like Helen Burns in *Jane Eyre*, Beth is presented to the reader as entirely blameless, a kind, saintly creature who never does anyone any harm. Both struggle with ill health and have an unfailing belief that the next world will be a better place. (Keith 54)

In the novel, Beth may seem like a minor character that inhabits archetypal stature, especially in her role featured in *Good Wives* (Chapters 24-47 of *Little Women*, which were issued in 1869 as a “Part II”). She does not desire much, always wants to please others, and struggles with inconsequential faults. Unfortunately, her “lack of desire is also dangerous, for it makes Beth ultimately a martyr and a disembodied saint. She does not survive; her sisters do” (Sherman 22).

The entire cast does not revolve around her, yet her dying and departure are crucial to the development of Jo's story, and while contemporary readers may feel that the invalid's role is too saintly, especially in comparison to Jo, "the juxtaposition of the strong, difficult, potentially rebellious heroine alongside the sweet, passive and forgiving invalid was a common feature of the nineteenth-century literature" (Keith 34). Beth's role is to teach Jo the importance of domestic duties, and while Lois Keith dismisses Beth March as being "purely to service the emotional growth of the non-disabled protagonist" (208), her role is easily dismissed by other critics, too, as just an allegory of innocence.

Furthermore, unlike Nell Trent, Beth's dying does not appear to be instructing others on how they should aspire to live for *Little Women* is "less explicitly Protestant or even Christian in its reference" to death (Sherman 245). The invalid does "not rebuke Jo with saintly speeches, [but] only loved her better for her passionate affection, and clung more closely to the dear human love" (Alcott 459). In regards to Jeremy Taylor's manual, *Holy Dying*, Beth's death is Christ-like as it is sacrificial, although it does not carry the same momentum on how to live and die properly as it appears so in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Beth's surrender and death scene are solely reserved for her family, although Jo bears the brunt of her death so that the older sister can continue to grow into womanhood. Meanwhile, Beth accepts her role into sainthood by demonstrating the ideal behavior at her deathbed scene, even if she shows some resistance to death at first, as shown in Chapter 32. When realizing her death is near, Beth seems preoccupied and depressed, which causes some concern for Marmee. Jo only argues that her sister is "growing up, and so begins to dream dreams, and have hopes and fears and fidgets, without knowing why or being able to explain them. Why, Mother, Beth's eighteen, but we don't realize it, and treat her like a

child, forgetting she's a woman" (313). Jo is, of course, wrong. Despite her age, Beth is a still model of child-like righteousness and purity, making her death necessary since the invalid cannot visualize a life without her parents. She is already enclosed in a separate world from her sisters, and if she leaves the house, she is obligated to marry and have children. Beth dies, not only to allow Jo to take up the role as caregiver to their mother and father, but also so she can "still [seem] among them, a peaceful presence, invisible, but dearer than ever, since death could not break the household league that love made dissoluble" (436). Beth essentially relocates her world into another realm outside of earth.

Yet how is this all possible? How is Beth able to convince Jo to disregard her ambitions to write and remain unmarried? The climactic scene in *Little Women* is Jo turning down Laurie's proposal. It is an extremely unusual literary event of the nineteenth century; a scene that has its female protagonist reject the values of her society along with its conventional roles. Laurie begs the tomboy, "If you loved me, Jo, I should be a perfect saint, for you could make me anything you like," to which Jo denies him by saying, "I won't risk our happiness by such a serious experiment" (353). Therefore, Laurie heads off to Europe and ends up falling in love with Amy, enabling him to transfer his affections to someone whose refined manners make a better match for his wealth and social position. Meanwhile, Jo stays at home to take care of her dying sister, whose face now starts to carry a "strange, transparent look . . . as if the mortal was being slowly refined away, and the immortal shining through the frail flesh with an indescribably pathetic beauty" (360). Rather than portray Beth's unrevealed illness as ugly and diseased, her beauty is seen as if she is chipping herself away into a porcelain *objet d'art* so she can be observed as not only spiritually pure, but even divine (Gilbert and Gubar 25).

Beth will later tell Jo she is dying in a scene that is evocative of Martineau's memoir, such as the invalid resting halfway between life and death, and where the act of dying is becoming clearer to the invalid than it would to the healthy. It is as if the March invalid understands "the presumption of the inextinguishable vitality of the spirit afforded by the experience of material decay, is the strongest" (Martineau 111). Beth welcomes her death as she is expected to; she resigns to her fate, stating that she isn't "like the rest of you. I never made any plans about what I'd do when I grew up. I never thought of being married, as you all did" (363). At this point, "Beth is already gone. Even before she dies, she's become another creature" (Adamo 15). What creature she is has transformed into is up for debate, although this brings us back to Martineau's comparisons of the invalid and the "Seraph." Regardless, Beth proves, like Little Nell, that she also knows the art of how to die well.

The family eventually accepts the inevitable as they group together to make Beth's last year on earth more pleasant. Even during her dying days, the invalid continues her domestic tasks in bed, such as gifting knitted gloves and dolls for schoolchildren outside her window. And as Laurie continues to spend his time frolicking in Europe and falling in love with Amy, Jo spends her time nursing her sick sister, just as women played the central role in both the sickroom and the good death (Herndl 26). It is Jo's task to assure her sister to a tranquil passage to the afterlife, and it is during these last scenes that Jo watches Beth come to terms with her own mortality. Jo and the audience must realize that the invalid is important to her family, and even though Beth's life has not been ambitious, the two sisters discuss their beliefs as they believe death will not part them. As Jo says, "I used to think I couldn't let you go, but I'm learning to

feel that I don't lose you, that you'll be more to me than ever, and death can't part us, though it seems to" (404). Beth agrees:

I know it cannot, and I don't fear it any longer, for I'm sure I shall be your Beth still, to love and help you more than ever. You must take my place, Jo, and be everything to Father and Mother when I'm gone. They will turn to you, don't fail them, and if it's hard to work alone, remember that I don't forget you, and that you'll be happier in doing that than writing splendid books or seeing all the world, for love is the only thing that we can carry with us when we go, and it makes the end so easy. (404)

The entire chapter contains the sentimental and conventional Victorian deathbed scene that stands out from the rest of the didactic novel, as the reader is forced to visualize the end of Beth's slow, lingering death. The text even relies on purple prose, which is reminiscent of *The Old Curiosity Shop*'s death and funeral scene of Little Nell. The difference is that Little Nell's moment of death focuses on the corpse, which "allegorically signifies the possibility of the human body overcoming sin and all other signs of difference" (Bronfen 89). Dickens's heroine is beatified after her demise to stage perfect happiness, and to also show that death is the great liberator of earthly sin. In *Little Women*, however, there is no direct reference to the dead body; Beth is taken by her "Mother and sisters [who] made her ready for the long sleep that pain would never mar again" (405). Abjection of illness and death are never mentioned, especially when one takes into consideration that Alcott never explicitly writes the immediate cause of Beth's death. All that is explained is that, over the years, Beth's health deteriorates to the point where she must accept she is dying and to embrace it. The readers are only to know that, during that last year on

Earth, the invalid's body became frail, but her spirit grew stronger, psychologically and spiritually.

Beth's death becomes Christ-like in nature, not only because the invalid sacrifices herself to Jo, but also because there is no mention of burying the corpse. One would think that with all of its religious undertones, *Little Women* would at least feature Beth's funeral as it is an important secular rite for the dead at this time period. According to Christian theology, Last Judgment calls the dead forth from their graves, and those judged worthy will enter heaven (Smith and Hung 771). The grave, then, does not signify the end, but rather, as a transformation into a new beginning. Yet Beth never receives this particular ceremony, maybe because Alcott did not want to tie Beth's image to the process of bodily decomposition. As readers, could we see this lack of funeral as an act of ascension where the body is taken up into heaven at the end of her earthly life, like the cultural myth of Jesus Christ? If Beth was preserved from sin in her role as the saintly invalid, it would make sense that she would also be preserved from the effects of sin after death. Chapter 40 only leaves us with a description of Beth lying dead in bed, alone, "the placid face upon the pillow" (405). The next time we hear from the invalid again is in Chapter 43, "for Beth still seemed among them, a peaceful presence, invisible, but dearer than ever, since death could not break the household league" (436). The March invalid, like Nell, supposedly never rots. The difference is that while Nell's body is incorruptible, Beth's simply disappears. So if Beth really is too good for this earth, if she really is an ethereal being, her missing body could be an allegory that promises eternal life to its viewers.

There is also another haunting aspect about Alcott's novel that allows other deceitfulness to continue that does not include idealized death. Following Beth's end, Jo seems to inherit her

younger sister's role as the "angel in the house" after watching Beth in her sickroom and on her deathbed. At first, the promise to support her family is hard for Jo to keep, as her parents, "who had taught one child to meet death without fear, were trying now to teach another to accept life without despondency or distrust, and to use its beautiful opportunities with gratitude and power" (418). Within time, though, Jo becomes more content with her new domestic image of femininity, as well as participating in her own household duties until eventually she "finds herself humming the songs Beth used to hum, imitating Beth's orderly ways, and giving the little touches here and there that kept everything fresh and cozy, which was the first step toward making home happy" (418-19). This is peculiar because throughout *Little Women*, Beth functions as a foil to Jo on several occasions, as Jo is a strong, restless spirit, whereas Beth is always anchored and frail. When the invalid sister dies, it is as if Jo's assertiveness suddenly vanishes, too:

By the end of the novel Jo has no rebellion, no self, left. Jo's mind, earlier filled with divided but vital and authentic impulses, is now—like the doll Joanna's head—vacuumed out and replaced with Beth's one-dimensional, selfless personality. (Estes and Lant 119)

What could explain for such a change in character? Had Jo successfully acted out the nurse-patient union Bailin discussed, where "the nurse and patient are two sides of the same self" and that, sometimes, there is a "shifting from one role to another by a single character" (26)? Or is there a more insidious reason for such a transformation?

To return to *The Old Curiosity Shop*, K.J. Fielding argues that Dickens's story "must be read as a fairy-tale" (95). And while its author argues that he saw "the lonely figure of the child

with grotesque and wild, but not impossible companions,” there is also a battle against sickly realism, as to “hold fixed in our mind the still, sad icon of goodness, the small girl in her bed, surrounded by misshapen and eccentric figures” (Schor 32). On her travels, Nell suffers alone, and after death, becomes nothing more than a passive object of admiration, as if simply created for the cathartic moment of that infamous deathbed scene. It is obvious her imperishable corpse is the most important element of her demise; yet the large attendance at Nell’s funeral scene cannot be overlooked, either. When gazing at the body, even one as purified as Nell’s, the whole town is there, as if “there seems to be safety in numbers. We can relax our guard to some extent and examine the external symptoms of death” (Quigley 13). Nell’s body is safely carried to its tomb because the town faces the spectacle together.

In *Little Women*, though, Jo devotes herself to the invalid sister and watches every ailing transformation while “living in the darkened room, with that suffering little sister always before her eyes” (Alcott 181). Jo stays with Beth out of guilt for letting the invalid get sick at the Hummels, and also as a way of taking control over the overpowering sense of death. Yet by never leaving Beth’s side, Jo transforms, too, as if the stress of caretaking may cause existential suffering. Today, we have the benefit of transferring terminally-ill patients to hospice care, where the burden falls in the hands of trained and emotionally unattached healthcare workers. So when the tomboy watches her invalid sister die in Chapter 40, the deathbed scene is not a moral lesson for anyone else *but* the one who remained by the invalid’s side. When Beth dies, the plot continues forward while the horrifying replacement of Jo’s character remains largely ignored by critics, even when it should be an obvious change in personality. It is as if Beth’s spirit may have entered inside of Jo. But if *Little Women* is supposed to be realistic, moralized fiction, can the

story also be disguised as another genre of storytelling, as well? If, “everywhere fairy tale merges into reality” in Dickens’s *Old Curiosity Shop*, can there be any sense of sensationalism in Alcott’s domestic novel (Johnson 325)?

Angela Estes and Kathleen Lant argue in their essay, “Dismembering the Text,” that “Alcott, employing both a surface narrative and a subtext to disclose an extended vision of feminine conflict, presents a vision of female experience at once innocuous and deadly” (101). The *Little Women* author is forced to murder Jo’s spirit because, at the end of the story, the protagonist subdues much of her rebellious, independent nature in order to become a little woman/good wife to her eventual husband, Professor Bhaer. In the context of the book’s time, Jo’s options are limited, and choosing not to be married meant to be placed into the forlorn existence of spinsterhood. While there is already one spinster in the form of Aunt March, “the (quasi) old maid of the family, [who] constitutes one important identificatory alternative for Jo,” Alcott could not have written her protagonist in such a way that would give her the neat ending of Victorian domesticity her readers were hoping for (Kent 53). After Beth dies, Mr. Bhaer returns to the March home, seeking his friend from New York, and “Alcott chooses to murder her dearest child rather than force that child to live in a world hostile to her” (Estes and Lant 104). It seems with no one else left to marry, Jo is forced to wed the professor, making the repression of her character at the end of the novel necessary, even if Bhaer is a “funny match” for her. Alcott even admits this detail in response to her young fans, who begged the author to pair her with Laurie:

Jo should have remained a literary spinster, but so many enthusiastic young ladies wrote to me clamorously demanding that she should marry Laurie, or somebody,

that I didn't dare to refuse & out of perversity went & made a funny match for her. I expect vials of wrath to be poured out upon my head, but rather enjoy the prospect. (*Selected Letters* 125)

The Bhaer/Jo pairing did cause much discord for her fans, considering that Bhaer, the expatriate German who tutors children in New York to support himself and his nephews, is comical and cannot be taken seriously. His name, which sounds like a concoction between “beer” and “bear” even labels him as a buffoon, while he is also “poor, alien, and powerless” in comparison to the rich, handsome boy next door (Murphy 578). But in terms of Nancy Armstrong's sexual contract, Jo and Bhaer are considered a good match since there is no class conflict between the two, although Jo must “relinquish political control to the male in order to acquire exclusive authority over domestic life, emotions, taste, and morality” (41). Bhaer helps domesticate the girl, where Laurie would only encourage her overly passionate behavior, considering how he “greeted the sale of her first story” (Keyser 89). A relationship with Laurie would even be as tempestuous as Jo's writings: rebellious and volatile, while allowing the tomboy to defy nineteenth-century values of womanhood.

In terms of subtext, Jo's ambitions to write and remain unmarried are erased by this German man's presence. Through his unattractive disguise, Bhaer doubles as Jo's father: “Like Mr. March, Bhaer is a philosopher, deeply conversant with German Romantic poetry and idealist philosophy...” and “in this unworldliness Bhaer also resembles Mr. March, whose role he takes in his response to the Weekly Volcano's literary productions” (Sherman 57). It is no secret Professor Bhaer gripes about Jo's potboilers, but Mr. March, a mostly silent character, speaks out to Jo about her immoral stories. After shaking his head, he cautions his daughter, “You can do

better than this, Jo. Aim at the highest, and never mind the money” (263). Jo eventually learns her own version of the “sweetness of self-denial and self-control” by devaluing her own talent and writing stories that are “worse than trash” (77, 326). By sacrificing her identity as a sensational writer, the story can happily end with Jo’s marriage to Mr. Bhaer, therefore continuing “the patriarchally centered family from which Jo has been trying to escape” (Grenby 125). Everyone in the family can remain in place, including Beth’s spirit and Jo’s body.

One particular reason as to why Jo falls in love with the German professor is his unshakable faith in religion, which can suppress abjection and its horrors. When Jo fears she is internalizing her writing research, she calls it a “morbid amusement” and begins to live “in bad society, and imaginary though it was, its influence affected her, for she was feeding heart and fancy on dangerous and unsubstantial food, and was fast brushing the innocent bloom from her nature by a premature acquaintance with the darker side of life” (340). Later, when a group of philosophers hold an “intellectual tournament” with conversations that praise Kant and Hegel, they hold the belief “that religion was in a fair way to be reasoned into nothingness and intellect was to be the only God” (343). This captures Jo’s interest, even if “she knew nothing about philosophy or metaphysics of any sort, but a curious excitement, half pleasurable, half painful, came over her as she listened” (343). Bhaer condemns these discussions while beckoning Jo to leave, but she chooses not to go. Instead, the professor must defend religion “with all the eloquence of truth—an eloquence which made his broken English musical and his plain face beautiful” (343). Jo then holds Bhaer in high regard and wishes for his respect. So when the professor condemns her writing style, too, Jo ceases her sensational stories. Indeed,

If she sometimes looked serious or a little sad no one observed it but Professor Bhaer. He did it so quietly that Jo never knew he was watching to see if she would accept and profit by his reproof, but she stood the test, and he was satisfied for though no words passed between them, he knew that she had given up writing.
(348)

Estes and Lant's theory that *Little Women* is a horror story is interesting, especially in comparison to the Gothic romance novels that Jo herself is so fascinated by. Her longing to retreat into the private world of writing and reading contradicts her own public and gendered world, and potboiler books, like *The Heir of Redclyffe*, might inspire her because they examine the darker sides of human nature, while also condemning Victorian ideals as false. Pulling her away from her sensational writing, and having her character change personalities so quickly could be a "'gothic' study in horror" (Estes and Lant 103).

Yet this answer seems like a flippant response to the seriousness of *Little Women's* message about Christianity. It is not so much that Jo is "murdered" and replaced with a "false Jo, a broken doll, a compliant Beth," but that sacrifices have to be made in the style of *Pilgrim's Progress* so that earthly trials can be overcome by acting on the duties towards other family members (Estes and Lant 120). Religion and morality are the barriers we use when we must confront death and dying as a way to purify the abject. If death is chaos, then religion controls the abject. Religion is also one of the basic elements of authority of humans over other humans. It capitalizes on the innate fear of death, and is one of the most efficient methods of achieving solidarity in a community.

For example, when Jo is listening to that particular conversation that promotes the extremes of German philosophy and its tendency to atheism, she is both pained and fascinated by these conversations. This is reminiscent of the debates on human origins during the nineteenth century that challenged existing religious traditions, as the Victorian era entered the first great Age of Doubt: “One may not think that the Victorians have much to teach us about religious doubt and uncertainty. But they lived through tumultuous times when their deity seemed to abandon them, traditions appeared to be losing their grip” (Lane 3). In 1859, Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, which supported the idea that humanity was only an evolving organism with no hope for an afterlife. From these ideas brought about the concept “survival of the fittest,” a term coined by British economist Herbert Spencer, whose ideas of economics paralleled with Charles Darwin’s theories of natural selection. Other skeptics and free thinkers, such as David Hume and Thomas Paine, would also break down the monopoly of the Evangelical ideals on dying well. But by having Professor Bhaer debate Kant and Hegel through his traditional views of Christianity, Alcott uses him to deny this so-called “nothingness” to protect Jo from a crisis of faith so that “the world got right again” (343). This allows her to believe that “God was not a blind force, and immortality was not a pretty fable, but a blessed fact”; she is then comforted, as at Beth’s deathbed scene, by the paramount message that there is an afterlife where families will be reunited after death (343).

But by offering Jo salvation from the atheists, Bhaer also takes it upon himself to deny the powers of her brain by disapproving her sensational writing as it defies nineteenth-century values of womanhood; something Laurie never did, as the boy only encouraged her work. In Sherry Ortner’s article “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?,” the basis for associating

women with nature and men with culture depends strictly on women's ability to reproduce. Man can only produce artificially through technology and symbols because "he creates relatively lasting, eternal, transcendent objects, while the woman creates only perishables—human beings" (14). But if men were to accept that a woman has the abilities to reproduce in both realms, culture and nature, then men would also have to admit their own inferiority (Herndl 86). Jo obviously has the capabilities to create human life and "transcendent objects," and at a time when women were expected to accept the roles of wife and mother, she can reject these conventional roles, too. This would, however, make the pairing of Bhaer and Jo uneven if she were to have more power over him. Besides, the audience knows sensational writing is dangerous; when Jo is too engrossed in her work, she lets Beth nurse their sick neighbors, the Hummels. If Jo wishes to remain in the idyllic community the novel uses as its backdrop, she must also adapt her creativity into the new sentimental style in order to remain in this cultural fantasy of the happy Victorian family. So, at the end of the novel, Jo produces two boys instead of continuing to write, which leads Amy to comment on how different Jo's life is from what she thought it would be like. Jo replies back to her sister that "the life I wanted then seems selfish, lonely, and cold to me now. I haven't given up the hope that I may write a good book yet, but I can wait" (470). It is in this revealing line that Jo fully acknowledges the worth of Beth's selfless desire to live for others.

Despite the ending, Jo remains the most complex character of *Little Women*, although it is Beth who represents true genius as Jo's higher conscience. Some may argue that the invalid conforms too easily to society's expectations of the role that women should play in the nineteenth century, "the angel in the house," as this assumption means she is expected to be

devoted and submissive to her husband. Yet notice how there is no husband for Beth; in fact, she is the only one who avoids the constraints of nineteenth-century social expectations to marry young and start a family; something Jo desired but never received. Beth remains the safest, perfect woman: one who is submissive and dead, and “her death discloses one sure way of curing a woman’s problems” that keeps her safe from the dissolution of female community by connecting her spirit to Jo’s body (Estes and Lant 113). As someone who exercises the most power while also being able to keep her family together, Beth’s legacy lasts beyond her own mortal life inside of her favorite sister, Jo:

The only sister to reach the Celestial City and get exactly what she wishes for is Beth, via the Valley of the Shadow. Beth wished for very little, and that is what she is rewarded with in the end. The only way she can remain a child is to die, and so she does, guided by her mother and father to the heavenly gates. (MacDonald 118)

Jo also sacrifices as she returns to her family and maintains the tradition of domestic tranquility. So while “the submissive spirit of [Beth] seemed to enter into Jo,” this should not cause a response of horror to nineteenth-century readers as much as it might to a contemporary audience (*Little Women* 184). The tomboy simply absorbed the lessons of the deathbed scene, even if the result may appear like an “impersonation of the dead” (Estes and Lant 114).

This secret violence against Jo is not the only thing kept hidden in *Little Women*. While the story takes place during the Civil War, it is also completely devoid of combat and battle, as death casts a large shadow on both the North and South at this time. Dying was not unfamiliar to mid-nineteenth-century Americans, but the Civil War would alter attitudes about death: “Death’s

significance for the Civil War generation derived as well from the way it violated prevailing assumptions about life's proper end-about who should die, when and where, and under what circumstances" ("The Civil War Soldier" 4). The four-year conflict changed how Americans viewed the dead, because, for the first time in history, photographs of corpses on the battlefield defied what had become the pervasive idealized notions of dying. In October 1862, photographer Mathew Brady displayed Alexander Gardner's photographs in his New York City studio. The exhibit, "The Dead of Antietam," was the first time in American history that the public could see the realities of war. As an anonymous reporter wrote in the *New York Times*:

Mr. BRADY has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war. If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our dooryards and along the streets, he has done something very like it. . . . Of all objects of horror one would think the battle-field should stand preeminent, that it should bear the palm of repulsiveness. But on the contrary, there is a terrible fascination about it that draws one near these pictures, and makes him loth to leave them.

The war would also take "young, healthy men and rapidly, often instantly, destroyed them with disease or injury" (*Republic of Suffering* xxi). Gone are the assumptions that Martineau made about the sick or dying having control over their personal space, while the cultural convention of the "good death" were destroyed for those millions who died on the battlefields, away from family. Death by warfare was not predictable, but chaotic, and soldiers were not given enough time to "acknowledge" their inevitable outcome nor allowed to dwell upon the teachings of a higher power. Most died far from home in an unfamiliar territory with no adequate provision for

burials being made; as a result, the nation carried an abundance of human remains. Dying without burial haunted many soldiers, including Confederate veteran Thomas J. Key, who said, “It is dreadful to contemplate being killed on the battle without a kind hand to hide one's remains from the eye of the world or the gnawing of animals and buzzards” (qtd. in Adams 88). As a compromise, soldiers may have simulated a “good death” by surrounding themselves with photographs of their family in a makeshift deathbed, as depicted in the folk story of Amos Humiston, who laid down to die with an ambrotype photograph of his three small children in his hands. Accounts such as this proved that “photography had just become a force in American life, and so soldiers could have these little photographs, often in cases, that they would take with them of their family members” (Faust, *Death and the Civil War*).

Additionally, Alcott knew the gruesome effects of the Civil War while serving as a nurse. Her work, *Hospital Sketches*, does depict the horrors of warfare as her protagonist openly admits to the audience to “having a taste for ‘ghastliness,’ [for] I had rather longed for the wounded to arrive, for rheumatism was n’t heroic, neither was liver complaint, or measles” (26). The story is grim, containing “the vilest odors,” a hall full of “the wrecks of humanity,” and the “legless, armless, or desperately wounded occupant . . . [which] admonished me that I was there to work, not to wonder or weep” (28). This is why it seems strange that *Little Women* shields itself away from the topic of death until Beth’s demise in the second half of the novel, and even then, it is represented not as destructive, but in a domesticated context. In fact, the Civil War is mostly kept offstage, despite the tide of death that would sweep through the nation for four long years, while any mention of it in the book is essentially glossed over. Mr. March may serve as an army chaplain who becomes ill during his service, but later returns happy and well; John Brooke

serves in the Union Army for a year, and is sent home after being wounded, although his injury is kept vague; and even Laurie makes a mockery of battle by playing war games at Camp Laurence. As John Limon proposes, “What is the Civil War doing in the first volume of *Little Women*?” (183). The critic later states that the only alternative to the story is that Jo must fight a self-Civil War, where Beth’s death allows her to fully internalize her conscience. This, of course, parallels Mr. March’s intent: “I know [the girls] will remember all I said to them . . . [and] conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women” (18). By transforming into a hybrid version of Beth, Jo’s self-restraint and self-control keep both the tomboy and her dead sister existing at the end of the text.

The only deaths that occur in *Little Women*, then, are not from the Civil War as one should expect, but ones that occur at home so that they can be kept, controlled, and softened. Sacrificial deaths that keep the March family together. Any other elements of the Civil War are either diminished or sentimentalized so that religion can purify the abject by having Beth become the only major death in the story. So when “soldiers and their families struggled in a variety of ways to mitigate such cruel realities, to construct a Good Death even amid chaos,” Alcott simply disregards this to keep the Victorian ideal of death inside the proper familial surroundings (*Republic of Suffering* 9). The absence of Beth’s body also signifies a triumph over death; no awareness of Beth’s body or grave functions as a way to preserve her purity and wholeness, while her spirit can still exist and operate inside of Jo.

While Charles Dickens’s *Old Curiosity Shop* has become somewhat obscure to contemporary readers, *Little Women* continues to shine as a classic. According to a poll released by Harris International in 2014, it is one of the ten most beloved books in America. This of

course makes Alcott's coming-of-age tale a favorite to adapt to modern audiences, and has been for many years. According to American composer Mark Adamo, the different film portrayals of Beth have varied; she has been depicted as anything from the 1933's "doe-eyed, raven-tressed maiden," to 1949's "child rather than . . . girl," to 1994's "wraith, [who is] hollow-eyed and intense" (Adamo 10). It is for this reason that his opera rendition of *Little Women* will be our visual focus, even if Adamo describes it as a "radically condensed version, with the first half of the book packed into one scene" (qtd. in Bolton 6). The composer's work brings contemporaneity in contrast to the other deathbed visuals mentioned in this study, as "neither the three Hollywood films nor the musical versions fully succeeded in capturing the book's soulful magic while retaining its Victorian-era charm" (Dalton 48). The opera's rendition, however, is an outstanding example of the intersection between the drama of the nineteenth century and today's popular culture. One today can experience for themselves the anxiety of characters gathering around Beth during her final hours. Below are the stage directions directly pulled from the script:

A translucent Beth dozes in a throne of pillows as her family keeps vigil. A disheveled Jo bursts in: Beth bids her family leave the two of them alone. Frantic, Jo plumps pillows and prattles about a possible restorative trip to the seaside before Beth, with a hint of her old force, silences her. She urges Jo to accept her impending death, as she, Beth, has had to: Jo, beaten, agrees. "Mother and father: you're all they've got now. Promise me you'll take care of them," Beth insists: Jo accedes. Relieved, spent, Beth drowns; Jo drowns beside her. When Jo awakes, Beth has died. (Adamo 66)

The leitmotif theme so prevalent in Adamo's opera is "Things change, Jo." That is, the imaginative world Jo inhabits must come to an end as she reaches adulthood. No longer can the tomboy live in her insulated world of sensational writing for she must surrender to Victorian female domestication and its society. For Adamo, the one true conflict of *Little Women* is Jo versus the passage of time as transformations occur to all of the March sisters: Meg's impending marriage to John Brooke; Amy slipping off to Europe to grow into maturity; and Jo herself, who escapes to New York after Laurie begins to show he has romantic feelings for her. However, as Jo returns to Massachusetts, she discovers that Beth is terminally ill. Adamo even notes, "What is death but the most radical of transformations" (15)?

Beth's deathbed song, "Have Peace, Jo," is arguably the most sentimental piece in the opera, as it showcases heartbreak and remorse in the sickly March girl's death. In this dramatic scene, Beth knows there will be no recovery, even though Jo anxiously rejects the idea that her invalid sister is dying. Beth's consolation music offers comfort that she, Beth, is going to a better place:

Have peace, Jo
It's best, Jo
Release, soon, then rest.
We'll not weep. We'll not fight.
Just sleep, soon, and then only light.
Only light. (2.3.)

The aria is simple and clear, but also haunting as Beth acts as Jo's mentor just before death. Although Little Nell's deathbed scene in *The Old Curiosity Shop* must rely on Cattermole's "At Rest," Beth is not aided with the same obvious symbols as Nell's illustration to allude to her end. Rather, she vocally describes her dying ("How poorly I slept last night! / Just let me close my eyes a minute."). Yet like Nell, Beth gently slips into a sleeplike state of death, as if to bridge the

gap between the known and unknown of death while also softening the family's sense of loss (Kastenbaum 42). Death is once again portrayed as sleep, as if dying is a peaceful and dignified endeavor as opposed to the natural response of the human body upon near death, including pain, cardiac arrest, and relaxation of the bowels. It is a cleansed image that erases all traces of illness while also idolizing the beloved deceased. It is not the typical violent scene of death that modern audiences watch in television shows and movies, in which the corpse is often a prop "that cater[s] to the vicarious thrill of watching others being killed" (Quigley 39). While the deathbed scene featured in *Little Women* is just as unrealistic, at least here in Adamo's libretto it is portrayed sympathetically for "It is ironic that we no longer witness the deaths of our loved ones in their beds, but watch the contrived deaths of actors from our own beds via network or cable television" (Quigley 41). Today, we satisfy our fascination with death through media outlets, and at the same time, avoid the raw emotions and responsibilities of caring for the dying in the home setting. We do this by placing our nearly-deceased in hospice care in their final moments so that their illness and death are not palpable.

Despite the fact that the story of the March girls is based on Alcott's own life, contemporary audiences may see the story as overly-romanticized and instead, adopts a heavy tone of sentimentality. Much like how *The Old Curiosity Shop* sentimentalizes death in 1840s, *Little Women* shields itself from the harsh realities of female independence and the Civil War so people can turn to it for comfort. While this "autobiography" seems too good to be true, Alcott makes sure to remind readers that its key player in sentimentalization, Beth, should provoke empathy from her readers, for the invalid is not glorified in comparison to her other sisters:

There are many Beths in the world, shy and quiet, sitting in corners till needed, and living for others so cheerfully that no one sees the sacrifices till the little cricket on the hearth stops chirping, and the sweet, sunshiny presence vanishes, leaving silence and shadow behind. (46)

The sickly March girl has no ambition or prospects for her future, and her life does not revolve around the entire cast while *Little Women* continues forward without her. Beth's death only occupies "just a small space in the [novel]," but it is critical in advancing the story (Keith 33). Likewise, the theme of sacrifice so often made in *Little Women* is also a major theme in Christianity. With Beth's death as the biggest surrender in the novel, it allows Jo to live a normal existence within the standards of a Victorian sentimental novel as this Christ-like death offers consolation despite suffering and premature loss: "Bound for death for much of the book, Beth . . . seizes her dying as a moment of worldly power, making her deathbed a pulpit and using the grief she inspires plant her expectant presence deep within" (Brodhead 90). She dies so that her indignant sister can be redeemed through the emotional acts of suffering and resignation to her fate of marriage and motherhood. In the end, Beth's "submissive spirit" does seep into Jo, even though the invalid's body disappears into the hands of her family. This forever transforms both women, while death in nineteenth-century America remains as beautiful as it did in Little Nell's time.

Afterword
 “Dripping Reality”: The Paris Morgue and the Scientific Spectacle

To conclude this discussion of the saintly invalid and her deathbed scene, it is important to note that the nineteenth century also carries a history of people’s attraction to the repulsive nature of death. The Paris Morgue, established in 1804, displayed unclaimed corpses with the hopes friends or family would come inside and identify the bodies. Yet, towards the mid-to-late nineteenth century, realism in the age of the spectacle led to visitors participating as audiences, and gave everyone, regardless of gender or class, an opportunity to look at a series of decomposing carcasses. Because the morgue was open and free to all, the emergence of mass culture and spectacularization of city life transformed the morgue into a “shrine of positivis” (Mitchell 596). As a result, a larger building was constructed in 1864 featuring a *salle d’exposition* (showroom) and conceptualized as a “theatre of the masses” (*Spectacular Realities* 298-99). It is estimated that as many as 40,000 guests attended the deadhouse each day, although “the most popular corpses were those of children and the victims of unsolved crimes” (Davis 161). Onlookers brave enough to gaze at the ghastly remains of suicide and murder victims could witness for themselves the human body’s transition from a living thing to an inanimate specimen.

For Paris to repurpose death as a spectacle, and have crowds rush inside “a perfectly plain stone building” to see these gruesome bodies may seem obscene to contemporary readers (Cassell 274). Yet the nineteenth century saw the emergence of a new type of observer: the *flâneur*, a representative of the new urban and modern experience. This character, associated with the gaze, acted as an active participant in the crowd while appearing aloof from the

displayed sights. Vanessa Schwartz considers the concept of *flânerie* to signify as “a positionality of power” in which “the spectator assumes the position of being able to be part of the spectacle and yet command it at the same time” (*Spectacular Realities* 10). The morgue had been just one of the public institutions the *flâneur* visited, during a time when collections belonged to the public realm rather than in the hands of private collectors. Instead of creating knowledge for only the academic or elite, foundations like the museum promoted education for all in society. By rearranging content helped function a new way to disseminate knowledge, while providing a unique interactive experience between observer and object. Note, though, institutions also provoked imagination while introducing strange worlds and subject matter to its audience. Through the space of the morgue, the Grévin wax museum, and panoramas, reality was presented as “the present, the ephemeral, fugitive and contingent” (*Spectacular Realities* 4).

After all, those that lay in the morgue were not the corpses described so peacefully in literature; these were the everyday victims of horrid casualties, who were laid out on marble slabs and stripped naked with only a leather apron covering their groin. To preserve the corpses, cold water from the ceiling dripped against them, and if any of these bodies were left unclaimed, they would be displayed for three more days before burial. A large plate-glass window separated the *salle du public* from the *salle d'exposition*, to ensure the experience was purely visual for large groups of people. Thus, the unknown dead could be commodities for entertainment, and as the administrative director put it, “The Morgue is considered in Paris like a museum that is much more fascinating than even a wax museum because the people displayed are real flesh and blood” (“Cinematic Spectatorship” 304). Though the wax museum was popular when it debuted in 1882, it could never represent death as well as the morgue.

So why did the morgue attract so many visitors? According to Schwartz, the answers are unclear, although the “vast majority of visitors probably did not go to the Morgue thinking they might recognize a corpse. They went to look at real dead bodies under the pretense of acting out a civic duty. This was public voyeurism - *flânerie* in the service of the state” (“Cinematic Spectatorship” 299). To view the anonymous dead was to experience real life as a show during the age of the *Fin de siècle*; a cultural experience where real life was represented as a spectacle. Supported by the mass-circulated press, the morgue transformed the transcendent corpse of nineteenth-century literature into an ephemeral viewing experience. How? By having the papers sensationalize the accidents and murders that caused the deaths of the morgue’s victims. Meanwhile, the morgue became the site of newspaper narratives where the spectator could vicariously live the sensationalism he or she read about in the *fait divers*. As free theater to anyone willing to attend, the morgue nourished itself as being a morbid attraction, while visitors experienced the opportunity of macabre death in the safe position of observer. Based on further evidence, “the press seemed to favor reporting tales from the morgue that involved the corpses of women and children” as their greatest method for exploitation, although “popular descriptions and illustrations relied and drew on a set of conventions for representing death in literature and mortuary portraiture . . . in which women and children seemed to have a privileged position” (*Spectacular Realities* 70). Such extraordinary scenes, however, did not stop the morgue’s audience from entering the deadhouse for diversion and entertainment.

The nineteenth century also witnessed the beginning of modern medicine, the rise of positivism, and a general belief in the virtues of science as opposed to the qualities of vitalism as “ideas about dead bodies were shifting. The new science of anatomy meant that surgeons were

dissecting and displaying the interiors of corpses in ways that had not been seen before” (Peakman 249). Medical identification through observation is the result of a great epistemological leap taken after the French Revolution, which still shapes modern medicine. Today, health examinations include the patient being looked at, written about, and evaluated, rather than the idiosyncratic and highly individualized treatment seen in the sickroom of Victorian society (Bailin 9). Another key moment in the changing attitudes of the human body occurred during the separation of the living from the dead in Paris, France. In the late eighteenth century, the city banished burials within city limits in response to overcrowding issues inside the Saints-Innocents cemetery: “chemical agents . . . had been leaching from the site, polluting the air with miasmas, tainting water sources, and poisoning the city as a whole” (Strauss 1). Cadavers, thought to pose a risk of contagion against the living, were not decomposing as expected. They had to be exhumed and moved to locations outside of the population, and “cartloads of corpses moving through the nighttime streets of Paris must have created a strange and dramatic procession, surrounded as they were by an elaborate panoply of religious and hygienic prophylaxis” (Strauss 1-2). Indeed, the *Royal Society of Medicine* gives this ghoulish account of the exhumed dead:

The great number of torches and the lines of fires burning on every side and casting a funereal light; their reflections on the surrounding objects; the sight of crosses, tombs, epitaphs; the silence of the night; the thick cloud of smoke that surrounded and covered the work site, and in the middle of which the workmen, whose operations one could dimly make out, seemed to move like shadows; the various ruins left from the demolition of the buildings; the soil heaved up by the

exhumations, all of this gave to the setting an aspect at once imposing and lugubrious. (Strauss 2)

The morbid spectacle represented a decorative staging of fears against the deceased while requiring a need for public sanitation inside the city. As a result, scientific thought, particularly in medicine, gained influence during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as it would assert its authority to other institutions, such as the courthouses and Church. The corpses were categorized as a health hazard, while “Everything that rotted entered into a broader, somewhat indistinct field of dangerous forces that worked insidiously against life and humanity” (Strauss 5). Paris physically *and* theoretically cleaned itself during this public health movement while becoming a leading scientific nation (Hunter 43).

But by repressing “the filth that had to be excluded from Paris,” the corpse functioned as “an *operator*, a broad, labile, and emotionally charged concept that focused cultural transformation in a way that was not otherwise possible” (Strauss 166, 8). As Paris expanded, the dead became a repressed object of desire which “needed to be at some distance from daily life, but not so far as to remove them entirely from social rhythms” (*Spectacular Realities* 54). The morgue remained centrally-located in Paris during Haussman’s renovation of 1864 as it was believed large populations adjacent to the morgue helped serve its function. And more people did come to visit because it was death on display; actual death, that while sensationalized by the newspapers and its spectators, exhibited, too, a “public taste for reality” rather than the pious wish fulfillment staged in sentimental literature. The morgue did not have any connection with religious practices, so readers of the *fait divers* and tourists at the morgue could recontextualize the dead with their own imaginations despite desacralizing the dead bodies. Thus, “theatrical

Naturalism adopted a mode of spectatorship modeled on the scientific gaze” (Kairschner 15).

While many in Paris tried to unravel the mysteries of the dead, visitors could inspect cadavers in forensic detail to legitimize their own theories on possible causes of death. This is where we see the morbid imagination of nineteenth-century Paris joining forces with medicine’s rise to social power.

While the morgue was popular with Parisians, many prominent British writers recorded their experiences as “tour guides, essayists, poets and novelists” responded to this particular death scene as “an uncivilized, retrograde practice of displaying corpses to the public” (Vita 242). Their Victorian attitudes towards Paris’s corpse display saw it as indecent and distastefully foreign, yet there is a certain savoring in describing the morgue to their audience back home as they are forced to reconstruct the visual experience in garish detail:

They do so to reaffirm their own impressions, their own response to the human body so utterly objectified through death. Be it through moral outrage or black humor, each writer condemns the bizarre aesthetics surrounding the morgue’s representation of death. (Vita 241)

Writers such as Carlyle, Trollope, Browning, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti all attended and discussed the deadhouse; Dickens also mentioned it several times in his work. The grisly location makes its appearance in several of his essays, while he appears intent on uncovering its effect on spectators.

Despite Schwartz’s argument that visitors could reread the dead inside the morgue, Dickens believed “the commodification of death was frightening and unforgivable, an example of the market economy run amok” (Tredennick 77). To him, the French dehumanize the dead by

making them a part of their everyday activities in the marketplace, a similar response to that of Ariès who mentions the French medieval cemetery, which acted as a

place for announcements, auctions, proclamations, sentences; scene of community gatherings; promenade; athletic field; haven for illicit encounters and dubious professions—in short, the cemetery was the public square . . . the center of collective life. (Ariès 70)

In his articles, Dickens does not mask the abjection of the dead, but instead, demotes the corpse to a spectacular display as the materiality of the corpse haunts him, as seen in 1863's *Traveling Abroad*:

Here, the corpse assumes agency, transforming itself from a lifeless, passive object to a moving, active subject capable of victimizing him. The corpse's new life seems to bring Dickens closer to the condition of death, a pattern underscored by his immersion in the very river from which the corpse had been retrieved. Similarly, Dickens's fear that he has ingested corpse water and caught what the corpse has (a bad case of death) blurs the line between them. As the article continues, so too does Dickens's haunting. (Tredennick 80)

Despite the obvious distance between the observer and corpse, the dead still pursue Dickens through hallucinations while demanding a change in the way the writer perceives reality. This perspective goes to show how the morgue challenged the Victorian's views on controlling the corpse. Dead bodies are no longer physically handled in front of a live audience, as was the case during deathbed scenes, but rather, an attendant prepares the rotting bodies behind the showroom's curtains. The active and loving participation of the deathbed scene is now replaced

by a secretive, gawking voyeurism where the dead are staged for entertainment while being contained behind protective glass, as if to shield the audience from this unknown specimen.

It is not just the British whose writing was influenced by these sickly, abject displays. Émile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* illustrates in vivid detail the social scene of the Parisian morgue. In Chapter 13, antagonist Laurent attends the building in hopes of finding his murder victim, the invalid Camille, and is repulsed by what he sees: naked bodies in various states of rigor mortis, where "some seemed like lumps of bleeding and decaying meat" (117). With each visit he takes, however, he becomes fascinated by these melancholic displays. Laurent transforms himself into a spectator who is both nauseated but captivated by the violence of death, as the "sight amused him, particularly when there were women there displaying their bare bosoms. These nudities, brutally exposed, bloodstained, and in places bored with holes, attracted and detained him" (119). Yet the one female described on a slab is expressed in more beautified terms in comparison to the other corpses:

Once he saw a young woman of twenty there, a child of the people, broad and strong, who seemed asleep on the stone. Her fresh, plump, white form displayed the most delicate softness of tint. She was half smiling, with her head slightly inclined on one side. Around her neck she had a black band, which gave her a sort of necklet of shadow. She was a girl who had hanged herself in a fit of love madness. (119)

The text here is wrought with splendor, and carries distinctive signs of possible necrophilia. While Zola's description may seem like a stretch — erotic voyeurism as one of the morgue's infamously known features — this can be traced back to incidents of perversion that occurred at

the Paris Morgue when a certain number of persons were discovered, on separate occasions, masturbating in front of the glass case where the cadavers were exposed (Thoinot 448). Lust for the dead at the morgue is no surprise to Jonathan Strauss, as the building promoted the dead as desirable, and “an element of its immense attraction derived from its peculiar and unprecedented combination of death and sexuality . . . where Parisians of all milieus could view naked strangers” (172). It is no wonder the taboo concept of sexual attraction involving corpses caught the imagination of Zola while writing his first major work.

The dangerous amalgamation of the dead is just as perilous in *Thérèse Raquin* as it is for Dickens; whenever treacherous lovers Thérèse and Laurent try to embrace each other, visions of Camille’s corpse appear between them, as if the dead has infused itself onto their sexual lives. They cannot even stand to touch each other, although “a consanguinity had become established between them,” based on their fears of their corporeal specter (155). Both Thérèse and Laurent are haunted by Camille, although Laurent’s visions and dreams are more sexualized in comparison to Thérèse’s imagination. Examples in the novel include Camille “[extending] his arms to [Laurent] with a vile laugh, displaying the tip of a blackish tongue between its white teeth” (150); Laurent imagining himself falling from the ardent clasp of Thérèse and entering “into the cold, sticky arms of Camille” (159); and dreams of Thérèse holding Laurent in an embrace as she transforms into “the corpse of the drowned man [who presses] him to his chest in an ice-like strain” (159). Likewise, Laurent believes these interactions offer “abrupt and alternate sensations of voluptuousness and disgust, these successive contacts of burning love and frigid death” (159).

It is as if Camille acknowledges Laurent's pleasure in the dead female body, and taunts the murderer to pursue another debauched taboo, necrophilia. This is a crime still considered foul in modern society, yet still occurred in documented cases that shook the public's imagination in nineteenth-century France. One notable account occurred in 1848, when Sergeant François Bertrand was charged for sneaking into cemeteries, having sex with the freshly buried bodies of girls, and mutilating their bodies. Dr. Claude-François Michéa would state, "Of all these cases the most monstrous and disgusting is Bertrand's, for that madman sought out sensual pleasures not merely in death, he demanded them even from putrefaction" (Strauss 22). What made this particular case so heinous was not that Bertrand sought pleasure in the abstract, transcendent image of the dead female body, a theme explored in Elisabeth Bronfen's *Over Her Dead Body*, which discusses the objectification of the dead woman in art, poetry, and literature. Bertrand sought after the actual dead, and "The problem . . . was therefore not so much what Bertrand did to the dead as what the dead did to him" (Strauss 68). Dr. Marchal de Calvi discussed during the trial that Bertrand was not in control of his actions, as Bertrand's acts of necrophilia was an expression of monomania (Strauss 20). But much like Dickens's fears, the dead could harm the living, and not just physically; the dead could inspire unwanted passions, as well.

In society, sex between lovers is often presented in culture as the life force which is opposite of death, yet in *Thérèse Raquin*, it cannot prevent the menacing ghost from wreaking havoc on the living (Richman 157). Camille as specter will simply not allow the couple to move on with their lives until they, too, are dead. The invalid always holds power over Thérèse and Laurent in both stages of life and death. Alive, Camille's existence represses Thérèse's while she and Laurent cannot engage in sexual relations until he is murdered; and while Madam Raquin

may nurse her son from the clutches of death throughout his childhood, it is after his demise where he becomes a stronger force. At a time when religion promotes the idea that the eternal soul is supposed to outlive the earthly body, Camille still disturbs Thérèse and Laurent's waking lives and swims through their dreams through the representation of his sickly-looking corpse. It is only through death can Camille move from his marginalized position as a weak and crippled invalid into a supernatural power force. Like Nell and Beth, death gives him a higher power. The difference, however, is Camille's body is never fully restored, yet he uses his state of putrefaction to his advantage by haunting his living murderers.

In 1907, the Paris Morgue was shut down on the belief it made people disrespect human life in favor of exhibition (*Spectacular Realities* 83-84): "The audience, it seems, had moved from the *salle d'exposition* to the *salle du cinema*," as if spectators moved on to one spectacular reality to a more updated one: the new era of film ("Cinematic Spectatorship" 304). The dead had become too sensationalized, just as a taboo about death and dying began to set in, seven years before the Great War. The barbarity and unnecessary loss of thousands of young men would be one element in a changing attitude towards death, just as "death and dying were governed by medicine, not by religion, and the old art of dying was replaced by a medical and technical governance of death" (Lavi 15).

Ariés argues, "at the beginning of the nineteenth century, within one or two generations, there is a new sensibility that is different from everything that has preceded it," and "death is no longer death, it is an illusion of art. Death has started to hide. In spite of the apparent publicity that surrounds it in mourning, at the cemetery, in life as well as in art and literature, death is concealing itself under the mask of beauty" (442, 473). As religion and mortality rates decline in

the late nineteenth century, public health measures are put in place due to the discovery of sub-microscopic organisms as the main source of disease. Soon enough, the dead body was taken out of society and made transgressive as the “Victorian sentimentality would no longer do” (Neuberger 9). Descriptions of death would only haunt the public until the concept would gradually disappear in favor of Freudian thought and discussions of sex.

The closing of the Morgue reflects the attitudes of the invisible death we still see today: as failure, as something that needs to be contained behind walls, and as something that contaminates healthy lives. Death, which had been once all-pervading and familiar in society, must vanish from view, while a new sentiment is born; one that must avoid the disturbance of mourning, and not just for the dying, but for society's sake, as well. A reversal of taste against the deathbed scene occurs where even the unsightliness of dying interrupts the focus on a productive and happy life. As J. F. E. Chardouillet mentions in an 1881 analysis ahead of its own time: “the spectacle of death is distressing; that in a world of happy industrialism, no one has time for the dead” (Ariès 544). Trades which put a person in direct contact with the corpse, such as embalming and funeral directing, are associated with a disturbing communication with death. The only people who can escape such judgment are doctors and pathologists because “they perform their traditionally unclean tasks for a greater good” (Quigley 308). In spite of everything, what are the doctor's objectives? To treat illness that involves a cure, to aid in relief from pain and suffering, and, if possible, have the patient return to an active and normal life. Today, dying is no longer an art performance; it is a technical phenomenon determined more or less by the hospital team and not by the family.

As scholars have mentioned before, human beings can never precisely describe the moment of death; merely, they can only imagine it and “produce an assemblage of meaningful grief, memory, and inheritance” (M. Schwartz 14). This is why death plays an important part in literature and paintings, where writers and artists can use their imaginations to reflect, understand, and control their own world after death. During the nineteenth century, a reassurance of faith was created through images of an afterlife, provided by Jeremy Taylor’s pictorial wording in *Holy Dying*. As written by the cleric himself: “[*Holy Dying* is] the first entire body of directions for sick and dying people that I remember to have been published in the Church of England” (8). The deathbed became not only moralizing in tone, but consolatory, with a reassuring message that the dying may find peace in heaven. Despite Taylor’s masterpiece being published two hundred years earlier, Victorian Christians were still greatly influenced by the cleric’s words, which affected various Evangelical memoirs and journals. Excessively edited stories of death include “Invalids [who] might be seen as more spiritual, more full of sentiment, more authentic even, than those of more robust health” (Schantz 16). The realism of death expressed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, however, was less romantic, leaving many to ponder on how rare sentimentalized rapture was. By the late Victorian period, people would discard these ideas and be eager for quick, painless deaths over maudlin, drawn-out affairs, while technology would later lengthen and subdivide the act of dying. By transferring the site of death from the home and into hospitals, the master of death is no longer the caregiver or the suffering invalid, but the doctor, thus losing the traditional intimacy that had subsisted between man and death for thousands of years.

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